Understanding the role of the middle level leader in New South Wales Catholic secondary schools

Paul Craig Wattam

MA (Theology) (ACU), MEd Studies (Newcastle), Grad Dip RE (ACU), BMusEd (Newcastle), DSCM (Newcastle), LTCL, ATCL, LMusA, AMusA

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Declaration of Originality

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The research associated with this thesis abides by the international and Australian codes on human and animal experimentation, the guidelines by the Australian Government's Office of the Gene Technology Regulator and the rulings of the Safety, Ethics and Institutional Biosafety Committees of the University.

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Abstract

The role that leadership plays in schools is well documented. In particular, the roles of principals and teachers have received considerable research interest both in Australia and internationally. Those who lead from the middle level of leadership in secondary schools however, have received much less research interest. As such, those who are responsible for leading the learning from a faculty or subject department perspective formed the research interest of this study. This study has aimed to provide a better understanding of the role of middle level leader in New South Wales (Australia) Catholic secondary schools. The research explored the role as it was practised by eight middle level leaders, in six different Catholic secondary schools, in a regional diocese of New South Wales. The study investigated what middle level leaders did in their role, how their articulated role descriptions matched with the lived experience of their role and how the role has evolved over time. Principals of the eight middle level leaders were also interviewed to examine how their expectations aligned with those holding the role. In addition, the study sought to find whether there was unfulfilled potential in the role of middle level leadership. A conceptual framework was developed from the literature to identify key aspects at play for the role. The framework also illustrates the silences and those under-researched areas in the research literature. It highlights how this study might inform potential future understandings.

The research methodology used a qualitative, multiple case study approach. It included two rounds of interviews with the eight middle level leader

participants, interviews with their principals, as well as focus groups of middle level leaders and document analyses. Data were analysed and reduced to produce eight key themes. These themes provided insight into how the role was experienced.

It is clear from this study that there is a need to better frame the role, subject to its local context, with clear role expectations, boundaries and authority. This reframing would be best served by engaging in a distributed leadership approach, where middle level leaders are empowered to lead learning and to make greater contributions to leadership in the school more generally. There appears to be unfulfilled potential in the role at present. It is incumbent on senior leaders to tap into this potential so the role can be strengthened to benefit schools and students. Notably, middle level leaders and their principals are generally not well aligned in terms of their expectations. An outcome of this study is a series of seven recommendations to bring about a re-imagination of the role. A model of effective middle level leadership is developed from the research to illustrate the potential for the role with its attendant complexity and demands.

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Background to the Research

This study explores the role of middle level leaders in Catholic secondary schools in New South Wales[1] (NSW), Australia. The research interest for this study concerned those responsible for leading subject departments or faculties. This chapter provides an overview of the thesis and clarifies the purpose of this research. It also provides the context for the research and explains the researcher's interest in the topic. The research is then briefly located in the extant literature, against the backdrop of leadership more generally in secondary schools, noting the complexities of defining middle level leaders. Reference is also made to the research approach taken and the limitations of the study.

At the commencement of this study, the researcher was employed as a secondary principal in a Catholic school and was interested in finding out what others thought about the role of middle level leaders. The expectations others held for those holding the role was also of interest. Being curious about how those holding middle level leadership roles viewed their role, how they believed the role had changed or evolved over time, and what types of tasks and responsibilities they had with respect to classroom practice and student learning formed part of this research interest.

[1] New South Wales is one of six states and two territories in Australia. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, as at 2015, New South Wales had a population of approximately 7.6 million people, with about one in five students attending a Catholic school.

In the field of education, there has been considerable interest devoted to researching the role of the principal (Bezzina, 2012; Cranston, Ehrich, & Billot, 2003; Cranston, Tromans, & Reugebrink, 2004; du Plessis, 2013; Eacott, 2013, 2015; Fullan, 2014; Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008). This senior leadership role continues to change, with systems and departments of education exercising greater expectations on principals for local decision-making and leadership at the school level (Rosenfeld, Ehrich, & Cranston, 2009). With this continuing devolution of leadership responsibility from system level to principal, comes a cascading effect within the school whereby the principal, by necessity, design or both, then devolves responsibility to others (such as the assistant principal), with a subsequent flow-on effect on to middle level leaders (Brown & Rutherford, 1999; Rosenfeld et al., 2009). Roles and responsibilities of middle level leaders are impacted as a result of the devolution of responsibility; as these leaders are called on to perform tasks and duties that were once undertaken by more senior leaders.

From a curriculum perspective, Australian secondary schools, like secondary schools in the United States (Hannay & Ross, 1999) and the United Kingdom (Brown, Rutherford, & Boyle, 2000), traditionally have been structurally organised into faculties of learning (sometimes called subject departments) where classroom teachers are supervised and supported by department heads or middle level leaders. In turn, the middle level leaders are supervised and supported by assistant or deputy principals, and so on, through to the principal. This organisation of the school into sub-units, along subject department lines, has in some ways influenced and helped shape the organisation of secondary schooling (Fitzgerald, 2009; Rosenfeld, 2008).

Secondary teachers are closely aligned with, and linked to, their respective subject departments and often exhibit loyalty to this group (Brown & Rutherford, 1999). These faculties consist of either single subjects, for example English or Mathematics (but with varying courses and levels of study) or faculties that have a conglomeration of subjects attached to them such as the creative and performing arts, where drama, dance, music and the visual arts are often clustered together. Faculties are usually led by a middle level leader who variously has the title of head of department, faculty or Key Learning Area (KLA) coordinator, or studies coordinator. Most Catholic secondary schools have another branch of middle level leadership, which is concerned with the pastoral care and wellbeing of students with a year or house coordinator taking responsibility for a group of students for a defined period of time (often a calendar year, or sometimes for their entire time at the school). In the past decade, in some Catholic dioceses in NSW, the titles for those holding middle level leadership positions, whether in curriculum or pastoral areas, have been simply replaced with the term "middle leader" or "leader of learning". The term "middle level leader" will be used to refer to such positions throughout this thesis.

Middle level leaders play important roles in schools (Brown, Rutherford, et al., 2000; Busher & Harris, 1999; Dinham, 2007; Francis, 2007). Their work is essential to the operation of secondary schools, as middle level leaders represent the group through which policy decisions and strategic directions of the school are implemented at the faculty level (Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989). However, there has been considerably less research interest at this level (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009; Hannay & Ross, 1999; Mulford, 2007) than

there has been at both the principal level, as well as at the classroom teacher level (Dinham, 2007). Of late though, there has been increasing research interest shown in the work of middle level leaders (Bennett, Woods, Wise, & Newton, 2007; De Nobile & Ridden, 2014; Dinham, 2007; Gurr & Drsysdale, 2013; Mercer & Ri, 2006) and the key role they can play in shaping the learning culture and classroom practice of teachers.

This thesis addresses some of the under-researched aspects of the roles of middle level leaders, particularly in an Australian context. It seeks to provide some clarity around the role as it is practised i.e., what it is that middle level leaders actually do in their role, and how the role contrasts and compares with what various role descriptions say about the role they perform. The thesis explores the experiences of those middle level leaders who lead and manage faculties or subject departments, i.e., those who hold responsibility for the planning and implementation of the curriculum. An examination of the expectations of those holding the role is also undertaken, with these expectations being explored from the point of view of what middle level leaders expect of themselves; what they perceive their faculty member classroom teachers expect of them; as well as what principals report about the expectations they have of their middle level leaders. The evolution of the role over time is also examined. The next section further explores the roles of middle level leaders and provides some discussion about the complexities of definition with respect to the roles that middle level leaders play.

1.2 Complexities of Defining the Roles of Middle Level Leaders

The term “middle level leader” has been used to refer to a range of different roles and positions in schools. According to Brooks and Cavanagh (2009), the term is illustrative of the hierarchical nature of secondary school organisation. Often, how the role of a middle level leader is construed is highly dependent on local context and school or system structure (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). Similarly, ways in which individual subject departments carry out their tasks and roles in the context of the whole school also varies markedly both within and across schools (Brown, Rutherford, et al., 2000). At times, the literature refers to middle level leaders as those who also hold deputy or assistant principal roles (Cranston, 2006) or those responsible for year level or pastoral leadership (Crane & De Nobile, 2014). Not surprisingly then, De Nobile and Ridden (2014) argue there is some difficulty in describing the work and responsibilities of middle level leaders.

The work of middle level leaders varies from school to school and even from one middle level leader to another (Turner & Bolam, 1998). Among other things, middle level leaders are often responsible for implementing the vision and plans of the senior leaders in the school and assisting with realising the school’s broader goals (De Nobile & Ridden, 2014). One of their roles is to lead and manage the subject department for which they have responsibility (Kotzur, 2007). In addition, middle level leaders are generally responsible for the procurement of resources that staff in the department need to do their job (Cavanagh, Brooks, & Dellar, 2011; Jarvis, 2008) in delivering the curriculum (Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989; Smith, Mestry, & Bambie, 2013; White,

2002). Middle level leaders are often responsible for developing a sense of team and collegial practice among members of the department they lead (Bennett et al., 2007).

Traditionally, middle level leaders have not had the responsibility for setting school-wide strategic agendas nor taking major responsibility for the engagement or disciplinary action of teachers in their department or faculty (De Nobile & Ridden, 2014). However, what they have responsibility for is not always well understood (Weller, 2001), nor is it clearly defined (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009). In short, as Brooks and Cavanagh (2009) report, there is often a lack of "clarity in the definition and scope of middle leadership positions . . ." (p. 8).

1.3 Researcher Interest in the Work of Middle Level Leaders: Justification for the Research

As a senior leader in Catholic education for nearly the past two decades, it became apparent to the researcher that the role of middle level leader (as faculty or department head) was both a complex one and one where there appeared to be a degree of uncertainty about what was expected of those holding the role. Echoing the research, this observed uncertainty came not only from middle level leaders themselves but also from senior leaders within the school and, more broadly, at system level. There appeared to be variety in what middle level leaders actually did in their roles, depending on the individuals holding the role and the local context in which they worked. Given the pace of change in the educational landscape and the emphasis now placed on the pedagogical practice of teachers and leaders in making a

difference to student learning, the researcher began to question the pivotal role that middle level leaders could and should play in influencing the learning agenda within faculties as well as more broadly across the whole school setting.

While principals can exert considerable influence over the culture and climate of the school, it is the middle level leaders who potentially have the most powerful influence according to Weller (2001), over what the learning actually looks like in classrooms. As they still carry a substantial teaching role, they have an ‘on the ground’ view and experience of the classroom on a daily basis. As such, they are in touch with the day-to-day realities and challenges that their classroom teacher colleagues experience.

From the perspective of the principal’s position, the researcher was curious to investigate:

- what principals needed and wanted from their middle level leaders;
- what they understood the role of their middle level leaders to be; and,
- the contribution that middle level leaders made to the learning of all (students and staff) in the school.

Bendikson, Robinson, and Hattie (2012) suggest that principals can engage only indirectly as instructional leaders, with Fullan (2014) supporting the notion that principals are too far from student learning to have any direct impact on what happens in classrooms. The fact that it is classroom teachers and middle level leaders who take more direct responsibility for leading the instructional learning on a daily basis, highlights the importance of better understanding the role that middle level leaders do and can play in

influencing the quality of classroom practices. Hence, given the paucity of research in the area of middle level leadership (Hannay & Ross, 1999), this study seeks to address some of those silences, particularly in an Australian context and in a Catholic schools' setting. Among others, De Nobile and Ridden (2014) identify the need for further research in this area and recommend that, "a qualitative research methodology, investigating roles by way of interview and other methods would shed greater light on what middle leaders do" (p. 25). The research reported in this thesis responds to this recommendation. This research has been carried out in the Catholic diocese in which the researcher currently holds a senior leadership role at system level. The benefits and potential concerns regarding insider research are detailed in Chapter Four, the second of the methodology chapters.

1.4 Study Focus and Research Questions

In light of the above discussion, the research focus for this study was an exploration of the role of middle level leaders in New South Wales Catholic secondary schools. This central research focus was supported by five research questions:

1. What do middle level leaders do in their role?
2. How do the articulated role descriptions (written and verbal) of middle level leaders match with the lived experience of their role?
3. How has the role of middle level leaders evolved over time?
4. In what ways do the expectations of principals align with those holding the role?
5. What, if anything, is the unfulfilled potential evident in the role of middle level leaders?

1.5 Context for the Research and Overview of the Methodology

The research was undertaken in six Catholic secondary schools in a regional diocese of NSW, Australia. Eight middle level leader participants were selected from a pool of volunteer middle level leaders from across the diocese who agreed to be interviewed on two separate occasions for the study. The participants came from a variety of school sizes and types, with city, regional and rural schools represented. Further detail will be provided in the methodology chapters.

The principals of the middle level leader participants were also interviewed to ascertain their views on the expectations of those holding middle level leadership roles. Following the two rounds of participant interviews and the principal interviews, two focus groups were conducted. These groups were comprised of middle level leaders who initially signalled their interest in participating in the study, but who were not selected to be interview participants. They provided further information about the roles of middle level leaders and served to further probe any issues arising from the participant middle level leader interviews.

A qualitative case study approach was adopted for this research. The chief method of gathering the research data was through semi-structured in-depth interviews (individual and focus group) where middle level leaders' stories were documented individually in the first instance, with cross-case analyses subsequently undertaken. In selecting multiple participants, the research examined the experiences of a variety of middle level leaders, working in

different contexts and with different experiences, capacities and interests. Focus group sessions and document analyses were used to triangulate the data.

1.6 Limitations and Cautions

Like all research, there are limitations to the work. The study is a qualitative one where the voices of middle level leaders themselves are critical. However, it is acknowledged there must be caution around generalising the findings from these participants as being representative of middle level leaders more broadly. What is potentially more useful in attempting to better understand the role are the stories that the participants and their principals told about their lived experience of the role, what it means to them and what their understanding of the expectations of the role are. It is understood that these roles will vary as school contexts and cultures differ.

As the researcher is both a senior leader of the diocese in which the study was undertaken and the researcher conducting the study, the possibility for participants to feel obliged to participate and to provide particular perspectives and responses is acknowledged. Steps were taken throughout the study to minimise the potential for bias and for positional power differentials to influence the outcomes of the research. These factors are discussed in further detail in Chapter Four, the second methodology chapter.

1.7 Outline of Thesis

This thesis comprises eight chapters. Chapter One has introduced the background to the research, defined the role of middle level leader as it applies to this thesis, and detailed the researcher's interest in the study. It has also posed the research questions and provided a brief overview of the methodology. The limitations and cautions of the study have been discussed.

The second chapter, the literature review, contains an overview of the literature on middle level leadership, exploring it in the context of school leadership in general in the first instance. It seeks to position the middle level leadership role in the structure and practices of secondary schools and the ways in which the role has been understood, developed and enacted. The review examines the available literature in terms of the research questions posed as well as presenting some emerging issues in middle level leadership. A conceptual framework is provided at the end of the literature review: this is what drives the research. This framework illustrates the role as it is currently lived out according to the literature, as well as what might be understood about how the role is understood and enacted in the future. Major silences, under-researched areas and those aspects of the role remaining contested in the research are presented as the impetus for this particular study.

In Chapters Three and Four the methodological approaches taken are described. Chapter Three details the theoretical underpinnings of the research and explains the rationale for a qualitative multiple case study approach. The ethical issues are also outlined in this chapter. Chapter Four

describes the research design. The choice of participants and commentary regarding the cautions surrounding insider research are provided.

Chapters Five and Six present the findings of the research, with the voices of the middle level leaders and their principals provided in these chapters. Chapter Five presents the findings from the middle level leaders (both participants and focus group members) and Chapter Six presents the findings from the principals and the document analyses. The findings are again presented in terms of the research questions. At the end of Chapter Six the key themes that emerged from the findings are presented.

In Chapter Seven, the discussion of the findings draws together the seven themes that emerged from the data. They reveal the key issues affecting middle level leaders to better understand the role as it is experienced by middle level leaders in this study. The themes are again referred to in terms of the research questions posed.

The final chapter, Chapter Eight, presents the conclusions and recommendations from the research. The recommendations may prove useful for senior school leaders and system leaders as well as being of interest to middle level leaders themselves. Recommendations for future research are also suggested. The thesis concludes with a model of effective middle level leadership. This model draws together the possibilities for the role in the future, with some or all of the elements perhaps being useful for a reimagined understanding of the role.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The focus of this research study is to explore the role of middle level leaders in NSW Catholic secondary schools to provide an understanding of the role in action. In this chapter, the literature relevant to this study is reviewed firstly to situate middle level leaders in the wider school leadership landscape, and then more specifically to examine the role of middle level leaders. The chapter concludes by outlining the issues that have emerged from the literature and the implications that they posed for this research study. These aspects are synthesised in a conceptual model that has framed the research.

The literature review is structured in three main sections:

1. Situating the role
    a) leadership trends in secondary schools
    b) definitions of the middle level leader in the literature
2. The role of middle level leaders
    a) the role in action
    b) role description versus lived experience
    c) evolution of and changes to the role
    d) expectations of middle level leaders
3. Issues emerging from the literature
    a) conceptual framework outlining implications for research

The literature review commences by situating the middle level leader in the context of leadership trends in secondary schooling both nationally and internationally. Current trends in school leadership are discussed, with distributed and parallel leadership, and instructional and transformative leadership in particular being identified as having particular relevance to this study.

In this chapter, definitions of middle level leadership are examined. Subsequently, an examination of what constitutes the role of middle level leaders and how the role is enacted in schools is provided, noting the preparation and training that middle level leaders receive in order to take up the role. Consequently, the ongoing professional development needs of middle level leaders are explored as they influence and impact upon the ways in which middle level leaders enact their role.

The literature review also focusses on the degree to which the articulated role descriptions of middle level leaders match with the lived experience of the role. It then examines how the role has changed and evolved over time and the implications of these changes on the work and aspirations of middle level leaders to pursue further leadership roles. The expectations of, and on, middle level leaders are explored chiefly from the point of the view of senior school leaders such as principals and deputy principals, compared with those of middle level leaders themselves and the team of teachers they lead.

Throughout the chapter, summary tables are provided as a means of synthesising the literature, culminating at the end of the chapter in a

conceptual framework. This conceptual framework represents the key findings of previous research as relevant to this study, identifying those areas that are currently under-researched or silent in middle level leadership and hence informing this study's research questions.

2.2 Situating the Role

2.2.1 Leadership trends in secondary schools.

Interest in school leadership is widespread, with its importance on the outcomes for students well documented (Bush, 2009; Bush & Glover, 2014). Schools are complex organisations and their effective leadership is vital if improvements in student learning outcomes are to be achieved (Bush, 2009; Fleming, 2014). Both the changes to, and the rise in importance of, educational leadership have been significant in the past 20 years (Bush & Glover, 2014; Fullan, 2014; Starr, 2009).

Notably, changes in education in recent years have been prompted by a raft of worldwide changes including globalisation, technological advancements, business and economic models impacting on schools and developments in knowledge and understandings about the nature of learning itself (Lai, 2015; Starr, 2009). These changes in turn have brought about subsequent changes for systems, schools and individuals within them. The changes that have received the most research interest have often been those concerning the principalship (Cranston, 2009; Lai, 2015) yet schools are increasingly asked to develop a system-ness to their leadership, so that links and connections can be made beyond individual leaders and schools to develop federations, collaborative enterprise and shared thinking (Fullan, 2014; Hargreaves &

Fullan, 2012). Successful leadership, according to Dufour and Fullan (2013), is grounded in the work of systems and within schools, and is vested not only in the principal, but in all members of the school community. The next section examines the movement of leadership away from the central bureaucracy to the local, school level.

Decentralised leadership.

The educational leadership landscape is now one where schools have become both decentralised (self-managed) and, paradoxically, simultaneously increasingly centralised in their operation (Dinham, Anderson, Caldwell, & Weldon, 2011; Rosenfeld, 2008; Wise & Bush, 1999). Decentralised, local decision-making at the school level has seen much greater control devolved to individual schools over such matters as their finances, staffing arrangements, and teaching and learning. With decentralisation comes greater responsibility and accountability (Bush, 2009; Dinham et al., 2011) for principals who, in large part, have been responsible for implementing these changes. This has required a new way of looking at their work and the work of teams in schools, with the role of principal acknowledged as a highly complex and demanding one (Bush, 2009; Fullan, 2014). In the same way that additional demands have been placed on principals, so too have increased demands then flowed to assistant principals, middle level leaders and, in turn, classroom teachers (Brown & Rutherford, 1999; Rosenfeld et al., 2009). These demands have sparked considerable interest in how leadership is conceptualised and enacted beyond just the role of the principal in schools.

Running parallel with these changes, from an Australian perspective, a variety of key factors point to a growing sense of centralised control over education and educational leadership. These factors are inclusive of the introduction of the Australian Curriculum, the accreditation of all teachers in the country against the national standards outlined by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (2011), and the ongoing publicity and media interest surrounding national testing (National Assessment Program–Literacy And Numeracy) (n.d.). More broadly, this trend appears not to be confined solely to education, with Rosenfeld (2008) and Starr (2009), pointing to similar developments across the whole public sector. Table 2.1 summarises the key points here.

Table 2.1

Synthesis: School Leadership Issues

- Effective leadership of schools is vital for student learning.
- Local school management and decision-making has increased the responsibilities and accountability of principals.
- Assistant principals, middle level leaders and classroom teachers have had similar increases in responsibilities passed on to them by senior school leaders.
- Governments have increased centralised control over funding and other educational issues.

The next section explores different models of educational leadership (and the importance of instructional leadership in particular) in a school setting.

Current trends in school leadership.

It is widely accepted that the effects of leadership rank as second in importance to classroom teaching with respect to student learning outcomes (Bush, 2009; Bush & Glover, 2014; Jarvis, 2008; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Watson, 2009). Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, and Anderson (2010) have conducted a far-reaching, large scale, six year research study into leadership in the United States, involving nine states, 43 districts and 180 schools. At the commencement of this research, the authors contended that “leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning” (p. 9). At the conclusion of their research they reported that, “after six additional years of research, we are even more confident about this claim. To date we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership” (p. 9). It is, therefore, not surprising that efforts to improve leadership in schools receive so much attention.

While various models of school leadership have found their way into the educational lexicon over time, in more recent years there has been an emphasis on the principal as the instructional leader, which is also sometimes referred to as learning-centred or pedagogical leadership (Bush & Glover, 2014). Hattie (2009) makes a clear distinction between the instructional leadership and transformative leadership of the principal in influencing student learning outcomes, with the former being significantly more effective: “It is school leaders who promote challenging goals, and then establish safe environments for teachers to critique, question and support

other teachers to reach these goals together that have the most effect on student outcomes" (p. 83).

Various models and theories of school leadership can be found in the literature, including, but not limited to, transactional leadership, transformational leadership, managerial leadership and administrative leadership (Bush & Glover, 2014) and transcendent leadership (Branson, 2014; Lavery, 2012). While no one 'type' or model of leadership offers a panacea to the challenges facing principals today, it has been argued that competent school leaders will vary the leadership styles that they use, depending on the needs of the situation and the contexts in which they work (Bush & Glover, 2014; Male & Palaiologou, 2015).

School leaders actively engaging in instructional leadership place learning at the core of their work, reinforcing that learning is at the centre of a school's endeavour. Of significance are the arguments of Bendikson et al. (2012), who posit that secondary principals are more likely to engage in indirect instructional leadership than they are in direct instructional leadership, with the expectation being that heads of department, or middle level leaders, carry out this important function. Indeed Fitzgerald and Gunter (2006) suggest that leadership of learning takes place at all levels of leadership in schools, but that the work of middle leaders is pivotal in this arena. Fullan (2014) concurs with the notion that, while principals are expected to be instructional leaders, it is impossible for them to do so, particularly in large secondary schools, and points to the notion of the principal as the "learning leader" in a school where the role is "to lead the school's teachers in a process of learning to improve

their teaching while learning alongside them about what works and what doesn't" (p. 55). The next section discusses approaches to distributed leadership.

Distributed leadership.

There are arguments for distributed or shared leadership to pervade the school (Barnett & McCormick, 2012; Kotzur, 2007; Watson, 2009) and, while definitions of distributed leadership remain somewhat contested among researchers and practitioners (Crowther, 2010; Harris, 2013), sharing leadership among staff is now a quite well-accepted notion (Carter, 2016). It is conceived of as a collective activity (Watson, 2009) where a sense of collaborative spirit is engendered to support student learning (Dufour & Fullan, 2013). This view must be tempered, however, with the fact that most schools are still organised along hierarchical lines such that bureaucratic components of the role of principal then potentially become difficult to align with a collaborative, team-centred approach (Fitzgerald, 2009). Busher (2005) similarly cautions that there is a limit to the degree to which a collegial and democratic approach can be achieved in schools, given their hierarchical nature. This caution is highlighted by the fact that "some people in school have greater access to power and authority than others" (Busher, 2005, p. 140). Nonetheless, the notion of distributed leadership supports the leadership potential and power of many of the actors in the school setting, with multiple sources of influence (Harris, 2013) and sees staff working together towards a common goal or vision. Crowther (2011) contends that there is evidence that distributed leadership can lead to improved educational outcomes. It can also highlight the importance of using the talents and skills

of all staff towards achieving those goals. Consistent with this are the arguments of Bendikson et al. (2012), that “school leadership has a greater influence on schools when it is widely distributed” (p. 27). Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006) assert that distributing leadership widely is, in most cases, superior to vesting leadership in a single person. In their research conducted in 110 schools in the UK, the results demonstrated that schools enjoying the highest levels of student achievement attributed this fact to having influence that was widely spread across all forms of leadership.

Distributing leadership is seen as a process rather than a product (Watson, 2009) and requires the involvement of many in the school, with collaborative, inclusive and shared leadership (Duignan & Cannon, 2011) building communities of learning. According to Busher (2005), these notions are more likely to be sustained if they are inclusive of shared values and positive interpersonal relationships. Carter (2016) has suggested that the ability to develop relationships is important for any leader and is particularly pertinent to middle level leadership. There are clear implications here not only for the principal and senior leaders in the school setting, but also for the middle level leaders, who are both teacher and leader. While distributed leadership may be seen to be both desirable and effective, the research study of Wahlstrom et al. (2010) found that there was a significant gap between what schools thought they were doing compared with what actually transpired when it came to leadership. They note:

> If the profession has become enamored of distributed forms of leadership, as one might infer from current scholarship, the responses

> of teachers surveyed here suggest that few changes detectable by teachers have actually occurred in schools. The ground swell of support for distributed conceptions of leadership may well be a kind of meta-rhetoric denoting little reality on the ground. This possibility is consistent with a familiar criticism of schools: that as a means of legitimizing their work, they are more concerned with the appearance than the substance of change. (p. 32)

This commentary resonates with the work of Eacott (2015) who claims that contemporary policy structures have raised the profile of the principal, despite the rhetoric that promotes decentralised and devolved systems through distributed leadership and flatter organisational structures. Taking a somewhat different approach, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) posit that distributed leadership happens whether one likes it or not. It is the degree to which, and how, leadership is distributed in the school setting that can result in it being either effective or ineffective distributed leadership. To that end, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) have developed a distributed leadership continuum, at one end of which lies autocratic leadership, where all of the decisions are taken by the principal, sometimes together with a small band of formal leaders. At the other end of this continuum lies anarchy, where a leadership vacuum leads to disaster. On the continuum, and sitting above autocracy, is traditional delegation, then progressive delegation, guided distribution, emergent distribution and assertive distribution. As the level of distribution increases, the more formal means of distributing leadership through structures and roles dissipate, such that leadership is distributed through relationships, committees and political elements. Hargreaves and

Fink (2006) clearly point to local context as being important in guiding the degree to which leadership activity and processes are distributed in a school. The cautionary note here is on teacher leadership, which in the wrong hands, can undermine and destabilise a school, with the authors stating “there is more to distributed leadership than giving more leadership to teachers” (p. 107). Similar cautions are issued by Silcox, Boyd, and MacNeill (2016) who stress the various contexts in which distributed leadership will not work. They warn of the confusion regarding the term ‘distributed leadership’ which is sometimes confused with ‘delegation’. For middle level leaders, the mere delegation of tasks or ‘jobs’ to be completed gives rise to implications for their role, and as such, the authors point to the need to understand that distributed leadership is about shared leadership functions. It is not simply giving jobs or responsibilities to other people to carry out.

In a substantial, long-running research project involving 22 schools in Victoria, Australia, Crowther (2010) and colleagues implemented a school revitalisation project entitled IDEAS (Initiating, Discovering, Envisioning, Actioning and Sustaining). This project has found that distributed leadership in a particular form, parallel leadership, as described by Crowther and colleagues, was a key ingredient in the project and provided a model for successful leadership in school improvement. Crowther defines parallel leadership thus:

> Parallel leadership is a process whereby teacher leaders and their principals engage in collective action to build and sustain enhanced school capacity. It embodies four distinct qualities—mutual trust,

> shared purpose, allowance for individual expression and a commitment to sustainable school success. (pp. 36–37)

These four qualities imply a sense of reciprocity between teachers and senior leaders, as well as taking account of local contexts in terms of individual personnel and local school needs. Of interest and importance in this study, Crowther's (2010) notion of parallel leadership and its potential for capacity-building in a school still relied heavily on the input and commitment of the principal as a focal point in the process. The principals were key to identifying the need for change and were therefore, the "linchpin in mobilising the whole school revitalisation process" (p. 29).

An important outcome of the IDEAS project with respect to the concerns of this research study—middle level leadership—was the roles that middle level leaders took in the project. Crowther (2010) suggests that they were critical to the success of distributed or parallel leadership in that they were model teacher leaders (both deputy principals and heads of department) in the early stages of the project. They also acted as critical friends, particularly with respect to pedagogical development. Crowther further contends that distributed leadership, in the form of parallel leadership as revealed throughout this study, relies on system leaders, principals, middle level leaders and teacher-leaders working in different combinations to build capacity throughout the school to improve learning. In earlier research, Andrews and Crowther (2002) challenge the argument that the principal is at the centre of educational reform, with the influence of teacher leaders being instrumental in bringing about substantial change in schools.

Gurr and Drsysdale (2013), in a paper reporting on three studies about middle level leadership in Australian secondary schools, have contended that senior leaders play a crucial role in ensuring that middle level leaders are successful in their respective roles by providing them with support, appropriate professional learning and through building an appropriate culture and climate. It is the middle level leaders who, as Kotzur (2007) also describes as distributed leaders, represent “the key to developing successful schools” (Brown, Rutherford, et al., 2000, p. 239), a sentiment which is shared by Brown and Rutherford (1999) in an earlier work. It appears that the key to school improvement and success lies with all of the leaders in a school, where interdependence and reciprocity are hallmarks (Harris, 2013). Indeed, one of the keys to ensuring that leadership is distributed so that it builds the capacity and capability of all leaders in a school is described by Harris (2013) as being dependent on the degree to which those in formal leadership roles (particularly the principal), “provide the opportunities for others to fulfil and realise their full leadership potential” (p. 548). Harris (2013) further contends that the principal’s role is pivotal in setting up the conditions for the effective distribution of leadership and that this implies the challenge of rethinking issues of power, authority and control.

It seems that both distributed and parallel leadership have implications for the work of middle level leaders in how their roles are conceived and carried out. While much of the literature on distributed and parallel leadership nominates ways in which leadership can be distributed to those with capacity and expertise in formal and informal ways (Pont et al., 2008), there is little in the

literature that explicitly links the work of middle level leaders to the processes of distributed or parallel leadership that would unleash their potential to participate fully in the leadership enterprise of the school. There appears to be an apparent dichotomy between traditional top-down leadership from the principal, and bottom-up leadership emanating from teacher leaders, neither of which is particularly helpful in the context of this research. Torrance and Humes (2015) caution that teacher leadership, embedded within distributed leadership, needs to be "enabled and supported by those in formal leadership positions" (p. 798) so that leadership per se in schools emanates from a multitude of avenues, not simply from above or below. There is scope for the role that middle level leaders can play here. The next section looks at how schools have been structurally organised to build a reliance on different layers of leadership in a school.

The traditional organisation of hierarchical positions in secondary schools.

Traditionally, secondary schools have been structurally organised in a hierarchical model (Busher & Harris, 1999; De Nobile & Ridden, 2014; Smith et al., 2013), with a principal at the head of the organisation and one or more deputy or assistant principals "underneath" who take responsibility for varying aspects of the school's operation (e.g., curriculum leadership, student wellbeing, pedagogical leadership). Below the assistant principal level, particularly in larger secondary schools, are often two tracks of middle level leadership: one being responsible for curriculum and the other holding responsibility for student pastoral needs. Below them in this hierarchy are the classroom teachers. While there are many variations to this pattern, the basic

structural division of secondary teachers around subject departments is still found in most schools (Fitzgerald, 2009).

The following diagram (Figure 2.1) illustrates this division of roles. Clearly there is potential overlap with all leaders in the organisation likely to take on more than one set of discrete responsibilities. Classroom teachers and middle level leaders (MLL), for example, are typically also responsible for pastoral care or student wellbeing.

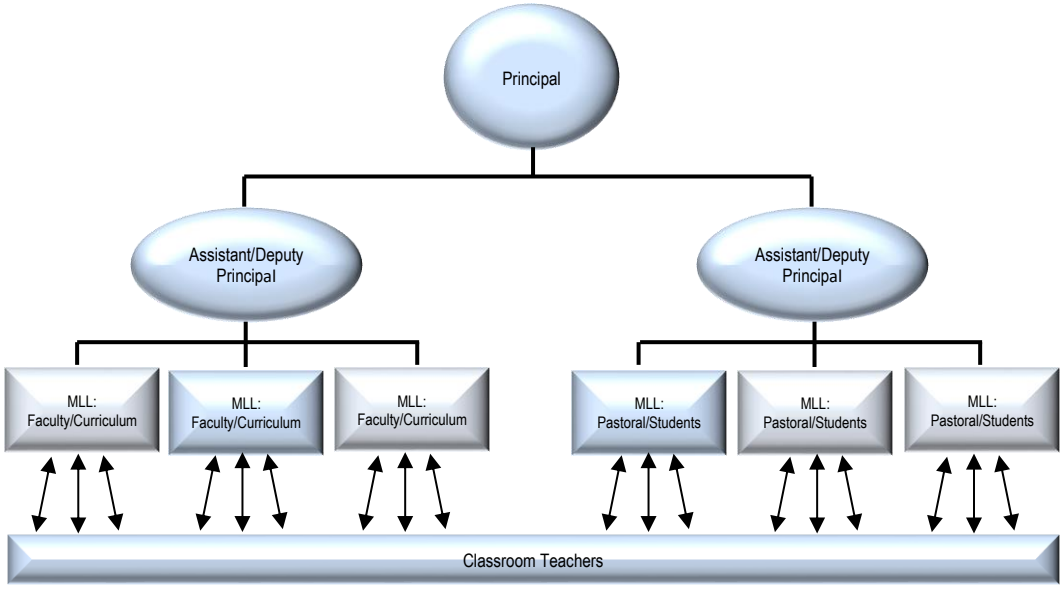

Figure 2.1 Structural Divisions in Secondary Schools

This section, summarised in Table 2.2, has situated the middle level leader in the context of the whole school and in particular, the leadership framework of the school setting.

Table 2.2

Synthesis: Key Aspects of Leadership in Schools

- There are various ways of framing leadership in schools with instructional, transformative, distributed and parallel leadership being popular forms of contemporary leadership.
- In secondary schools, the direct instructional leadership role is often delegated by the principal, to assistant principals and middle level leaders.
- Leadership is crucial in securing improvements in student learning outcomes.
- Distributed and parallel leadership offer opportunities for shared purpose and collaboration in support of student learning.
- Distributing leadership is dependent upon principals and other leaders providing opportunities for others to fulfil and realise their leadership potential.

The next section places the middle level leader in the realities and dynamics of school leadership. It explores the calls in the literature for a greater examination of the role.

2.2.2 The call to examine the middle level leader role.

Increasingly, the role of middle level leaders has attracted the interest of researchers, particularly in the United Kingdom where the National College for School Leadership (now called National College for Teaching and Leadership) has, in recent years (2003, 2006, 2007, 2011), produced a number of articles, packages and documents that detail the role, the expectations of the role of middle level leaders, and the changes that have taken place with respect to the role. In addition, the College has argued for a strategic approach to preparing staff to take up the role and articulated a

clear statement of where further research needs to be conducted with respect to the role in schools (Bennett, Newton, Wise, Woods, & Economou, 2003). From the literature, it appears that policy change, political expectations and the evolving nature of schools (Brown & Rutherford, 1999) have influenced the need for an examination of the role of the middle level leader where school based, local management approaches (Fitzgerald, 2009; Rosenfeld et al., 2009) have exerted pressure on senior school leaders to delegate tasks and policy implementation to middle level leaders (Brown, Rutherford, et al., 2000). This delegation has contributed to changes to the middle level leadership role and to the expectations associated with it (Bennett et al., 2003; Brown & Rutherford, 1998), with the role itself evolving (Foster, 2010). In turn, the middle level leadership group has also had pressure exerted on it to delegate to classroom teachers (Brown et al., 2000). Recently, questions have been asked about the level and quality of the contribution that middle level leaders make in school-wide strategic matters, in addition to leading a team of subject-based teachers (Poultney, 2007).

The next section of the literature review explores the role of middle level leaders in more detail and commences with how it “defines” the role. It then looks at how middle level leaders experience the role as it is enacted, and identifies key messages contained in role descriptions for middle level leaders. The evolution of, changes in, and the expectations that are held of middle level leaders, are then explored.

2.2.3 Definitions of the middle level leader in the literature.

As noted in Chapter One, the literature highlights that the term “middle level leader” is difficult to define (Kemp & Nathan, 1989 in Gurr & Drsysdale, 2013; Weller, 2001) particularly as it refers to specific roles and titles (Busher & Harris, 1999; De Nobile & Ridden, 2014). The role also varies markedly from school to school (Jones, 2006) and even within schools (Brown, Rutherford, et al., 2000; Busher & Harris, 1999). Generally, however, it is agreed that middle level leader roles fall into three broad categories: the first being subject or faculty leadership, the second being those who hold across-school responsibilities such as a general or non-subject specific curriculum leadership role and the third, those with responsibility for pastoral, student wellbeing or year-level leadership (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009; Fleming, 2014). Those occupying the position of middle level leader with subject or faculty responsibility may hold responsibility for a single subject such as English; a group of subjects such as History, Geography, Economics and Business Studies; or a cross-curriculum responsibility such as Information Technology. A middle level leader with responsibilities that span across the school may hold responsibility for tasks such as professional learning or pedagogical practice. The third group is often referred to as a year or student coordinator, house leader, year advisor and the like and has the prime responsibility for the wellbeing, academic and pastoral care of students (Crane & De Nobile, 2014). Table 2.3 summarises the most common types of middle level leadership roles found in secondary schools (Crane & De Nobile, 2014; De Nobile & Ridden, 2014; Gurr & Drsysdale, 2013).

Table 2.3

Types of Middle Level Leadership Roles

Middle Level Leader Role	Responsibilities	Examples
1. Head of Department/ Subject/ Faculty Coordinator/ Head Teacher	Design and delivery of the curriculum in a subject area or a group of subjects Programming, assessment and reporting, registers, organisation and purchase of resources Allocation of staff to classes, supervision of staff in the faculty Classroom practice of teachers	English Coordinator Maths Head of Department Creative and Performing Arts Faculty Head
2. Across the school middle level leadership	These roles are context based and vary in their description and responsibilities Often have over-arching responsibility for an area of school life such as curriculum, pedagogical practice or general administration	Curriculum Leader Administration Coordinator Leader of Pedagogy Professional Development Coordinator
3. Year level or pastoral/wellbeing middle leadership	A single year group such as Year 7 or Year 11 Pastoral care, academic care and student wellbeing Resilience, belonging, student spirit and community involvement Behaviour management Parent contact and communication	Year Advisor Student or Year Coordinator Pastoral Coordinator House Leader

As noted in Chapter One, the focus of this study is on those who hold curriculum or faculty leadership responsibilities. This role is described in Table 2.3 (at point number 1). For the purposes of this study, the term “middle level leader” specifically refers to those with responsibility for leading and managing curriculum through subject departments or faculties. However,

the literature relevant to broader definitions of middle level leadership will be drawn on where appropriate.

Middle level leaders who have the responsibility for leading a faculty or subject department are seen as major contributors to the academic endeavour and performance of the school (Busher & Harris, 1999; Weller, 2001). As such, they are often viewed as key players (Busher & Harris, 1999) in the school's operation and are therefore seen as central to the success of the school (Brown, Rutherford, et al., 2000; Dinham, 2007) and faculty (Brown & Rutherford, 1998). While there is some growing recognition that middle level leadership is important for student academic improvement and effectiveness (Toop, 2012; White, 2002), there is a lack of empirical research evidence in the literature explicitly linking the influence of middle level leadership to improvements in student learning outcomes (Bennett et al., 2003; Jarvis, 2008). Fleming (2014), however, suggests that effective middle level leaders make a significant contribution to school improvement, referring to middle level leaders as "the engine house of school improvement" (p. 20). Wise (2001), some years earlier had a different view, contending that there was generally little recognition of the role that middle level leaders play in school improvement. This view may reflect some evolution in the role across the past decade or so.

The literature is clear; the role is a complex one (Poultney, 2007; Rosenfeld, 2008) and, as schools change, extra accountabilities and responsibilities such as contribution to whole-school leadership (Mulford, 2007) are being added to it (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009; Mercer & Ri, 2006). However, some

argue that schools are not necessarily making full use of their middle level leaders (Weller, 2001), with the role itself often being under-valued and under-utilised (Cranston, 2006). Others stress that we still do not know enough about how middle level leaders lead and manage their faculty team, contribute to school improvement or what their training and development needs are (Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989). According to Francis (2007), ill-defined, inconsistent and even non-existent role descriptions for middle level leaders contribute to a lack of understanding about the role.

Given the difficulties in defining the role clearly, the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (2011) offers the following commentary:

> Middle leaders can be described as those who have responsibility for leading subjects, key phases, pastoral responsibilities or other aspects of the school's work.
>
> Typically, they lead an aspect of teaching and learning across the school. They monitor and evaluate, set direction, and lead and build teams that implement change. They have an influential role with colleagues, helping to create a focus on learning and contributing to the ethos that supports it. (p. 1)

This view is consistent with that identified in earlier research by Jones (2006), where the role that middle leaders play in schools being described according to the following key areas: leading innovation and change, leading teaching

and learning and building and leading teams and managing resources. The nature and scope of the role identified by Jones and the National College resonate well with the understandings of the role as enacted by middle level leaders in NSW Catholic schools. Table 2.4 summarises key aspects of the middle level leadership role.

Table 2.4

Synthesis: Defining the Middle Level Leadership Role

- In light of educational changes in schools, it is timely to examine the role of middle level leadership roles.
- Middle level leadership roles, while difficult to define, generally fall into three categories: curriculum/faculty based leadership, across the school leadership or pastoral/year-level leadership.
- Inconsistencies with role descriptions lead to a lack of understanding about the role.
- The role is a complex one with middle level leaders making contributions that are critical to the operation of schools.
- Curriculum-based middle level leaders lead teaching and learning in their designated faculty, working in and with a team.

In the next section, the role of middle level leadership as it is enacted in schools is explored. The role in action, the role descriptions, the evolution and changes to the role and the expectations of the role are all examined in some detail.

2.3 The Role of the Middle Level Leader

This section builds on the discussions in the earlier sections and describes the role of the middle level leader as documented in the literature. It is structured under the following four main subheadings:

2.3.1 The role in action.

This section examines the roles and responsibilities of middle level leaders. It explores the whole-school responsibilities they hold, the preparation and training that middle level leaders receive in order to take up the role and their ongoing professional development needs. The place of mentoring and coaching in the role and the skills and qualities of middle level leaders are also discussed.

Poultney (2007) provides critical insights into an understanding of the dimensions of the middle level leadership role. In her research, Poultney has identified two dimensions of the role; the first containing four themes of "personal characteristics, instructional skills and strategies, organisational/managerial skills and transformational qualities" (p. 9). The second whole-school leadership dimension contains two themes: working across the school and working with senior teachers. Similarly, White (2002) has found that middle level leaders live out their role according to four main areas: instructional leader; curriculum strategist; learning area architect; and administrative leader. These two earlier pieces of research provide a frame for considering the following section that synthesises the roles and responsibilities middle level leaders play.

Roles and responsibilities.

Middle level leaders fulfil a variety of roles and responsibilities. The literature variously describes the role in terms of the dimensions or categories of the roles and responsibilities they carry out (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009; Busher & Harris, 1999; De Nobile & Ridden, 2014; White, 2002; Wise & Bush, 1999). Middle level leaders do not necessarily do all of these things all of the time, with local contexts and circumstances and individual capacities influencing the extent of the role and the ways in which it is carried out. These vary somewhat throughout the literature in nomenclature, but essentially, there is general agreement across the research of Poultney (2007), White (2002), Busher and Harris (1999), and De Nobile and Ridden (2014) who report that middle level leaders are broadly responsible for leading relationships, educational matters (teaching and learning), school-wide matters and administration. This research is summarised below.

Relationships.

Relationships are inclusive of team building and liaison; developing and maintaining relationships in the faculty, advocating on behalf of the faculty, developing a culture of shared understanding, developing a vision and profile for the faculty, liaison with senior leaders and colleague middle level leaders as well as teaching staff, dealing with student issues, concerns and behaviour management issues.

Education.

Ensuring teachers have the required resources to do their job, ensuring that the curriculum is implemented and monitored, developing curriculum

materials, leading teaching and learning and pedagogical practice, planning for the professional development needs of the group and of individuals in the faculty, and being accountable for managing and supervising faculty members are all required for educational provision. Essentially middle level leaders carry responsibility for instructional leadership and the demonstration of expert knowledge in their curriculum areas.

School-wide responsibilities.

School-wide responsibilities include contributing to, and implementing, the whole school's vision, policies and procedures at faculty and classroom levels, interpreting and filtering whole school issues for staff, being the conduit between senior leaders and faculty staff members in order to facilitate channels of communication and participating in decision-making at whole-school level.

Administration.

The administration aspect involves clerical tasks that can include things such as collecting and collating marks and assessment results, paperwork, classroom allocation, communication and correspondence, and photocopying, filing and record keeping.

Recent Australian doctoral research is consistent with this summary. Examining the role of middle leaders in Western Australian secondary schools, Brooks (2013) has nominated nine core functions that middle leaders are expected to fulfil:

- coordinate the educational program;

- manage the operations of the area;
- comply with accountability requirements;
- support student learning;
- promote effective communication and collaboration;
- build school community and culture;
- contribute to whole-school planning and change management;
- promote and model professional excellence; and,
- support and encourage staff.

Again, it is important to note that the research reports each school operating in a unique context, emphasising requirements of all leadership roles will differ according to individual circumstances (Bennett et al., 2003; Turner & Sykes, 2007).

Leadership in faith-based schools.

In addition to the above, those middle level leaders engaged in work in schools with a particular religious affiliation such as Catholic schools, hold further responsibilities both implicitly and explicitly to lead in accord with the values, traditions and culture of that particular religious denomination. Variously, the literature points to the importance of moral and ethical purpose of leadership (Bezzina, 2012; Branson, 2014; Burford & Bezzina, 2014; Gleeson & O'Flaherty, 2016), contemplative practice for leadership (Schuttloffel, 2013, 2016) and the promotion of the faith identity of the school in leadership formation (Heidhart & Lamb, 2016) as being pertinent to faith-based schools. Middle level leaders and indeed all engaged in faith-based

schools are importantly seen as having an explicit responsibility to provide role modelling (Gleeson & O'Flaherty, 2016) to students and colleagues, which is in concert with both the espoused values of the faith tradition of the school as well as the personal values held by individuals (Branson, 2014).

In Gleeson and O'Flaherty's (2016) study of Irish and Australian Catholic schools, Australian Catholic teachers in particular were very aware of role-modelling and prioritised relationships as being central to this role as a moral educator. Bezzina (2012), in a project entitled "Leaders Transforming Learning and Learners" explored how leadership and learning based on shared moral purpose might assist teachers with their work in enhancing student learning. When staff in schools reflected on their moral purpose, they found that they were more readily able to live out their espoused values and to recognise them at work in their school setting. Further commentary on moral purpose in schools has been provided by Burford and Bezzina (2014) highlighting the fundamental importance of engaging the question that asks "What should I do if I am to make a genuine difference in the lives of my students?" (p. 408).

Naturally, moral purpose in learning is not confined only to those in faith-based schools. All involved in the enterprise of education should be driven by an overall moral purpose that guides their work (Queensland Education Leadership Institute, 2016). Moral purpose in education is ultimately about improving the lives and the learning of young people and bringing to leadership one's own humanity, so that learning is authentic (Burford & Bezzina, 2014).

Schuttloffel (2016) has conducted studies in American Catholic schools on the notion of contemplative thinking processes that school leaders engage in to further form the Catholic identity of their school. She asserts that Catholic school leaders have an additional religious dimension to their leadership which involves them confidently being able to articulate their own faith and to integrate this with their professional practice. This practice is inclusive of Gospel values, theology and Catholic tradition. In earlier work, Schuttloffel (2013) explains the importance of three common themes in decision-making leadership of a school's Catholic identity. These are: 1) the impact of one's personal life stories 2) a view of leadership as a vocation and 3) the priority of relationships. In concert with these notions, Lavery (2012) speaks of leadership of service in Catholic schooling with the leader's sense of themselves being important to their role and then acting from a positon of service for others in emulating Jesus as the ultimate servant. The role of leadership in faith-based schools requires role holders to act from moral, ethical and values perspectives that inform, form and provide the example to staff, students and community members. The literature describes "transcendent" leadership (Lavery, 2012; Branson, 2014) as a form of servant model leadership whereby leaders act in accord with the needs of others before attending to their own needs. There is an expectation that theology, religious and spiritual understanding and leadership of the prayer life of the school are integral to this leadership.

What is clear from the literature with respect to Catholic school leadership in particular is that there is a challenge of faith leadership that requires some

distinctive formation for leaders (Neidhart & Lamb, 2016) particularly in an increasingly secularised world, where younger aspiring and current leaders are faced with a "changing social and cultural context" (Neidhart & Lamb, 2016, p. 49). Faith leadership also brings with it some expectations that principals and other school leaders will "ensure that the doctrine and values of the Church are faithfully transmitted, and that a supportive ethos is encouraged and nurtured for all pupils and staff within the school" (d'Arbon, Cunliffe, Canavan & Jericho, 2009, p. 289).

In addition to the roles and responsibilities noted above, middle level leaders also carry a significant teaching load. In many schools, they carry at least 80% of a full-time teacher's load, making their priority their classroom teaching (Brown & Rutherford, 1998). According to Wise and Bush (1999), middle level leaders in their study put the curriculum development role second to their responsibility as a classroom teacher. The authors ranked the tasks performed by middle level leaders into four main categories: academic tasks; administrative tasks; managerial tasks; and educational tasks. Not surprisingly, the dual nature of the position (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009) of being both teacher and administrator can often cause confusion and tension for some middle level leaders. The next section examines what part middle level leaders may play in whole-school matters.

Whole-school responsibilities.

Some writers, such as Busher and Harris (1999), have argued that middle level leaders are not responsible for strategic matters at a whole-school level, but rather that their role is to implement and operationalise the vision of the

senior leaders. Even so, the degree to which middle level leaders might be involved in strategic decision-making will be dependent upon local context (Busher & Harris, 1999). Other writers, such as Adey (2000), suggest that middle level leaders ought to have a much more active role to play at the whole-school level in participating in shared decision-making. Notably, recent Australian research by De Nobile and Ridden (2014) does not even mention a whole-school function in the work of middle level leaders. Rather, they suggest that the leadership role that is played appears to be limited to their work within their department. Despite this limitation, Poultney (2007) reports middle level leaders being desirous of taking on a wider school role. However, while some senior leaders have agreed that middle level leaders could demonstrate greater understanding of how the school operates at this macro level, they were at times reluctant to allow the influence of their middle level leaders to grow beyond their faculty. Poultney also notes the lack of consistency from one school to the next in terms of how middle and senior leaders work together.

In summary, the literature reveals that the degree to which middle level leaders participate in whole-school matters in contributing to the wider strategic agenda again varies according to local context and school leadership structures (Busher & Harris, 1999; Gurr & Drsysdale, 2013). Some research such as that by Brooks and Cavanagh (2009), has found that middle level leaders desire more input at this level, whereas other research is silent on the matter. Table 2.5 summarises key points here.

Table 2.5

Synthesis: Roles and Responsibilities of Middle Level Leaders

- Middle level leaders hold a variety of roles and responsibilities.
- They typically take care of relationships, educational, school-wide and administrative matters. Leadership involves moral purpose.
- Leaders in faith-based schools carry an extra dimension to their leadership inclusive of values, role-modelling and leading and participating in the religious life of the school.
- Middle level leaders also carry a significant classroom teaching responsibility.
- Some middle level leaders have more input and involvement at whole school level than others.

The next section provides detail on what preparation and training middle level leaders receive for their role.

Preparation and training for the role.

There is considerable interest in the literature regarding the preparation and training of middle level leaders prior to their taking up the role (Brown, Rutherford, et al., 2000). In most secondary schools it appears that teachers are promoted to the role of middle leadership based largely on their experience and expertise as a classroom teacher (Fleming, 2014; Turner, 2000) or for their administrative skills (Carter, 2016). With the exception of England in the mid-2000's through the work of the National College for School Leadership, there appears to be a dearth of training and development specifically designed to prepare middle level leaders to take up the role (Dinham, 2007; Poultney, 2007). Weller (2001), in a research study of some 200 middle level leaders has found that more than 70% of them received no formal training for their role and also mostly learned on the job or did as their

predecessors did. Similarly, in the seminal work by Earley and Fletcher-Campbell (1989), middle level leaders did not feel adequately prepared to take up their role with any preparation often depending on the person with whom they had previously worked. Generally, the literature points to learning on the job (Adey, 2000; Turner, 2000), or learning by osmosis (Brown, Rutherford, et al., 2000) as being the chief ways in which middle level leaders have acquired the necessary skills and qualities to enable them to fulfil their role. There is evidence that previous heads of department (or middle level leaders) are quite powerful as models in shaping the way in which newly appointed middle level leaders carry out their role, both in terms of what they do and in what they do not do (Turner, 2000). Turner (2000) and Earley and Fletcher-Campbell (1989) suggest that both positive and negative experiences of previous middle level leaders serve to inform new middle level leaders once appointed to the role. Turner interviewed 36 Heads of Department in Wales regarding their preparation and training for the role. More than half of the interviewees spoke about learning valuable and positive lessons about leadership from their previous Head of Department. However, 47% of those interviewed reported learning from the poor leadership skills exhibited by their previous head of department. Included in these poor leadership skills were a lack of involvement in the department, feeling under-valued and, subsequently, a sense of being somewhat isolated. Turner also reports middle level leaders who experienced negative role modelling with such things as laziness, lack of commitment and lack of vision to the role, as being instructional in how not to lead a department. Turner has found that most middle level leaders learned about the role on the job, with only 19% of

interviewees in the study indicating they had received any training prior to taking up the role.

The literature points strongly to a need for more systematic professional preparation, guidance and training of middle level leaders (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009; Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989; Gurr & Drsysdale, 2013). In a local Australian context, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2013) in Victoria embarked on a program of professional development to build the capacity of up to 200 middle level leaders in schools. The recognition of the imperative to professionally develop and train leaders at all levels is also evident in the recent work of the AITSL where the lack of preparation for school leadership across the board is acknowledged in a major literature review (Dempster, Lovett, & Fluckiger, 2011). Table 2.6 summarises the key points from this section.

Table 2.6

Synthesis: Preparation and Training for the Role

- Few middle level leaders have received any training or preparation prior to taking up the role.
- Most middle level leaders have learned “on the job” or by watching what their predecessors did or did not do to inform their understanding of the role.
- There is a need for better preparation and training of middle level leaders.

The ongoing professional development needs of middle level leaders are explored in the next section.

Ongoing professional development needs of middle level leaders.

Ongoing professional development and learning requirements for principals and other senior leaders have received considerable attention in the literature in recent years (Bezzina, 2012; Bush, 2009; Dempster et al., 2011; Russell & Cranston, 2012). Notably, Foster (2010) asserts that too often, professional development and training in leadership is limited to principals and deputy principals, and is not available to those in other leadership positions in schools. Wahlstrom et al. (2010) concur and explicitly call for professional development programs in leadership for middle level leaders. They state that "secondary school leadership-development initiatives should focus at least as much effort on improving the leadership capacities of department heads as principals and vice principals" (p. 104).

Middle level leaders themselves have expressed a need for focussed professional development (Dinham, 2007) in key areas such as: leading teaching and learning (Gurr & Drsysdale, 2013); managing and dealing with people (Smith et al., 2013; Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014); general leadership skills (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009; Brown, Boyle, & Boyle, 2002; Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989; Rosenfeld et al., 2009); and staff development (Bennett et al., 2003). Francis (2007) argues that the most beneficial professional development (according to middle level leaders) is on-site and with colleagues, with one-to-one support seen to be really helpful. Both Mulford (2007) and Turner (2000) support this proposition. In addition to formal professional development in the form of training, it is argued that middle level leaders can benefit from opportunities to engage in mentoring and coaching, explored in the next section.

Mentoring and coaching.

The literature points to a lack of coordinated, whole-school (or system) focus on the professional development of middle level leaders in the past (Brown, Boyle, & Boyle, 2000), although some Catholic education dioceses in Australia such as the Catholic Education Office, Western Australia and Catholic Education Melbourne have recently developed emerging, beginning and established leaders' professional development programs. The Queensland Education Leadership Institute (QELi) has likewise developed a professional learning program designed specifically for middle level leaders. This institute continues to add to its suite of professional learning opportunities and includes a blend of coaching, professional learning, action research and the development of shared position papers for aspiring leaders, beginning leaders and experienced leaders. QELi provides a prime example of tailored professional learning to meet the needs of individuals, groups and sectors of education. Inclusive of these offerings are specific leadership courses over extended periods of time for those in the Catholic sector.

Regardless of the leadership position held or aspired to, from classroom teacher to middle level leader, or from middle level leader to senior leadership positions such as assistant principal and principal, there is general consensus in the literature that leaders derive benefit from mentoring or coaching, whether formal or informal (Gurr & Drsysdale, 2013). Rhodes and Brundrett (2009) report that succession planning in schools may well be improved if there were more coordinated approaches for potential leaders to experience quality role modelling, including access to mentoring and coaching. Similarly, Bezzina (2012) and Russell and Cranston (2012), in

researching leadership development programs for principals, both nominate mentoring and coaching as beneficial potential ingredients in a coordinated program approach. Bezzina specifically notes the past leadership experiences of others holding the role as being influential, reminiscent of the feelings expressed by middle level leaders about the influences that previous middle leaders have had on them. Bezzina also suggests that engagement in real-life problems as contexts for professional learning is beneficial, with positive role models being important. Similarly, in the work of Russell and Cranston, this approach includes networking opportunities where individuals are encouraged to develop collegial, professional relationships and with engagement in real-life work tasks. Table 2.7 summarises key points here.

Table 2.7

Synthesis: Ongoing Professional Development Needs of Middle Level Leaders

- Professional development programs are often aimed at principals and deputy principals.
- Middle level leaders report a desire to receive ongoing professional development in leading teaching and learning and managing and dealing with people.
- Mentoring and coaching could prove beneficial for middle level leaders.

The next section discusses the skills and qualities that middle level leaders possess and require in their role.

Skills and qualities of middle level leaders.

In a similar vein to the roles and tasks that are typically assigned to middle level leaders, the literature provides some detailed descriptions of the myriad

skills and qualities that the position requires (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009; Dinham, 2007; Fleming, 2014; White, 2002). In addition to aspects of the role referred to earlier, human relationship skills are often emphasised as being significant for the role (Bennett et al., 2007; Kerry, 2005; Martin & Williams, 2003). Strong interpersonal skills are important (Poultney, 2007) and revolve around the ability to build trust (Leithwood, 2016), possess knowledge and understanding of people, affirm team members and advocate on their behalf (Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989). Effective communication skills (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009), empathy and understanding are similarly important. Dinham (2007) reports that effective interpersonal skills are needed, especially the ability to be a role model for others. Effective middle level leaders need to possess a positive attitude and be open to new ideas (White, 2002). Further, high quality middle level leaders are experienced and effective teachers (Fleming, 2014), good listeners and they engage in collaboration (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009) and team building (White, 2002). They share resources and they are well organised (Poultney, 2007).

The ability to build and develop a sense of team and collegiality in the faculty is regarded as desirable (Busher & Harris, 1999; Hobbs, 2006). Middle level leaders are sometimes termed the “leading professional in the department” (Brown & Rutherford, 1998, p. 83) where a positive faculty culture is fostered and specialist curriculum knowledge is valued by staff (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009). Importantly, and perhaps reflecting changes in the role over time, Brown and Rutherford (1999) contend that traditionally, middle level leaders have viewed themselves more as managers of the curriculum than managers of their colleagues. Completing day-to-day administration tasks in an

effective and efficient manner is seen as a desired quality and one that most middle level leaders are comfortable with (Bennett et al., 2003). In an opinion piece on heads of department, Kotzur (2007) acknowledges that most middle level leaders are good at managing the day-to-day administrative issues and are effective at managing the paperwork. He urges middle level leaders, however, to move from management to leadership as a primary function of their work. Table 2.8 summarises key points from this section.

Table 2.8

Synthesis: Middle Level Leaders' Skills and Qualities

- Middle level leaders require a raft of skills and qualities. Important among these are interpersonal skills, with the ability to build relationships and a strong, collegial team.
- Administrative skills and specialist curriculum knowledge are valued.
- Middle level leaders are called upon to be more than administrative and curriculum managers, and to be leaders of their faculty.

The next section continues to explore the role of middle level leadership in the literature, focussing on the role description versus the lived experience of the role.

2.3.2 Role description versus the lived experience of the role.

Role descriptions.

It might be expected that the work of middle level leaders is described in a written role description. The extent to which the articulated role description matches the lived experience of the role varies from school to school and is dependent on local context (Busher & Harris, 1999). The literature suggests

that frequently, the role is ill-defined and role descriptions are either inadequate or inaccurate in reflecting the actual work of middle level leaders (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009; Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989; Weller, 2001). They are often written as a long list of tasks to be completed (Foster, 2010). Foster argues for role descriptions to be rewritten so that they contain leadership for teaching and learning, curriculum team leadership, and developing student learning. The responsibilities of the role should be inclusive of providing teachers with feedback from lesson observations and developing a professional learning community.

In Weller's (2001) study of middle level leaders, 77% of respondents reported having seen a job description, 40% said their job had expanded beyond the articulated role description, and 38% said there was little similarity between the role description and reality. Some researchers speak of a gap between rhetoric and reality (Bennett et al., 2003; Hobbs, 2006) with respect to what middle level leaders feel they should be focussing on, and what they actually do. An example is provided by Wise (2001), who has found the role description for middle level leaders nominated monitoring of curriculum delivery as a main responsibility, but in reality this rarely occurred. Similarly, Bennett et al. (2003) report rhetoric rather than a reality of collegiality in how middle level leaders described their departmental culture. The authors put this down to a substitution perhaps for professional autonomy. They also found that middle level leaders were reluctant to change the traditional view of the role, with administrative tasks being the most readily understood among them. The primacy, and prioritising, of administration work in the role is echoed by Glover and Miller (1999), who have found that middle level

leaders would attend to this aspect of their work rather than leadership, with half of their non-teaching time spent in meetings or in dealing with issues of student discipline. Adey (2000), Brown and Rutherford (1998) and Jarvis (2008) have all described middle level leader roles as being dominated by administrative, day-to-day tasks, with the role being primarily managerial in nature. Importantly, time is often cited as being in short supply for middle level leaders to be able to manage to do anything much more than deal with the paperwork demands of the role (Fitzgerald, 2009; Fletcher-Campbell, 2003). Wise and Bush (1999) conclude that “the survey findings provide clear evidence that the middle managers are shifting their emphasis from administration towards management but there is little indication that they are being given the time necessary to support this change” (p. 194).

It is clear that the middle level leader role is concerned with aspects of teaching and learning and leading curriculum (Dinham, 2007), with Bendikson et al. (2012) and Fitzgerald and Gunter (2006) placing middle level leaders firmly in a pivotal role of being direct instructional leaders of their departments. Toop (2012) describes middle level leaders as being the engine room of the school. Their responsibilities include promoting teacher quality through their curriculum leadership, observation of classroom practice and holding staff to account. Toop suggests that middle level leaders are indeed the key to closing the gap in teacher quality. In contrast, Rosenfeld et al. (2009) have found that the changing nature of middle level leadership roles has seen a diminishing of importance in instructional leadership. Table 2.9 summarises key points here.

Table 2.9

Synthesis: Middle Level Leader Role Descriptions

- Role descriptions are often ill-defined and inaccurate and are often written as a long list of tasks to be completed.
- There is often a rhetoric rather than a reality of collegiality in faculty departments.
- Middle level leaders have a firm role as curriculum experts. They are potentially the key to educational change and improvement.

The next section discusses role identity of middle level leaders and how this identity is forged.

Role identity.

As the earlier discussions suggest, the literature identifies a host of attributes that middle level leaders possess, or should possess. These attributes combine to help inform understandings about the identity of the middle level leader. According to Davidson and Griffin (2003), each individual in a team has a role to play and the team's role structure "is the set of defined roles and interrelationships among those roles that the group or team members define and accept" (p. 650). They further suggest that the expected role is translated into a "sent role" when messages are sent back to the individual about expectations. This notion of a sent role becomes important when considering role ambiguity and role conflict, where there is a lack of clarity and understanding in assumptions and expectations about the role from a variety of players.

In studying middle level leaders as they moved into their first senior leadership role (as Assistant Deputy Head), Turner and Sykes (2007) report

that a change of role can “trigger questions regarding professional identity such as ‘how am I expected to behave as a senior leader?’” (p. 27). Those holding the position of middle level leader exhibit a variety of understandings about their identity. The extant research on role identity for middle level leaders is not always clearly articulated nor is it necessarily consistent. At times, as noted, some research studies have revealed middle level leaders operating chiefly as administrators, performing routine tasks and reacting to situations (Brown & Rutherford, 1998; Jarvis, 2008), while other research suggests they are leaders and innovators bringing about change and making contributions to whole school leadership (White, 2002).

However, what is clearer in the literature with respect to role identity is the function that middle level leaders fulfil in a linking or conduit role between their faculty team members (i.e., classroom teachers) and members of the senior leadership team in a school (Dinham, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2009; Toop, 2012; Weller, 2001; White, 2000). Middle level leaders typically liaise between the two groups to translate policy and processes that have been set by senior leadership teams (De Nobile & Ridden, 2014). There is general agreement that middle level leaders play a significant role here in bridging (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009), buffering, or brokering in a two-way fashion (Bennett et al., 2007) - “up” to senior leaders and “down” to class teachers. Their identity of being in the middle is sometimes referred to as being *stuck* (Fitzgerald, 2009) or *caught* (Jarvis, 2008) in the middle, or even the “piggy in the middle” (Kerry, 2005) as they seek to respond to and, at times, mediate both groups within a school. In a study of deputy principals, Cranston (2006) similarly writes of this group as being stuck or caught in the middle. The

metaphor of the leadership sandwich in which the middle level leader is placed, and as a consequence often feels squeezed, has been employed by Brooks (2013), Brooks and Cavanagh (2009) and Wise (2001). In her recent doctoral thesis, Brooks (2013) captures the situation well: “It was felt that the increased work demands being placed on senior leaders and teaching staff had resulted in a sandwiching of the middle leadership position” (p.75). In short, middle level leaders experience pressure from both above and below them (White, 2000).

This role of being the conduit for two different groups brings with it a communication role, ensuring the messages are conveyed to senior leaders and also that information is transmitted to class teachers and then interpreted and implemented (Bennett et al., 2003; Moore, 2007). Some middle level leaders in the research literature see the role as one of advocacy: advocating not only on behalf of their faculty team members but the senior leaders in the school as well (Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989). Bennett et al. (2003) disagree here, suggesting that middle level leaders chiefly advocate on behalf of their faculty members. According to Brown, Rutherford, et al. (2000), in operating as a conduit, middle level leaders can filter the tensions in relationships between the two groups. This gives rise to potential role tension, role conflict and role ambiguity, discussed in the next section.

It is clear that these various metaphors—bridge, buffer, link and conduit—are commonly used to describe a key role that middle level leaders serve in connecting various individuals and groups in the school, particularly between the senior leader and the classroom teacher levels. It could be argued that

the description of the middle level leader as ‘bridge’ is not particularly helpful, in the sense that bridges take people from one place to the next, mostly in a horizontal fashion. An alternate metaphor is the one of middle level leader as conduit or pipeline, with a vertical orientation, representative of the hierarchical realities of positional and structural divisions in secondary schools. At each end of the pipeline is a funnel, which is narrower at the top (representative of senior leadership) and broader at the bottom (representative of a greater number of classroom teachers). Each end of the pipeline has a filter through which middle level leaders exert their influence. The middle level leader, as the name suggests, sits in the middle of the pipeline. Figure 2.2 provides a diagrammatic representation of this metaphor.

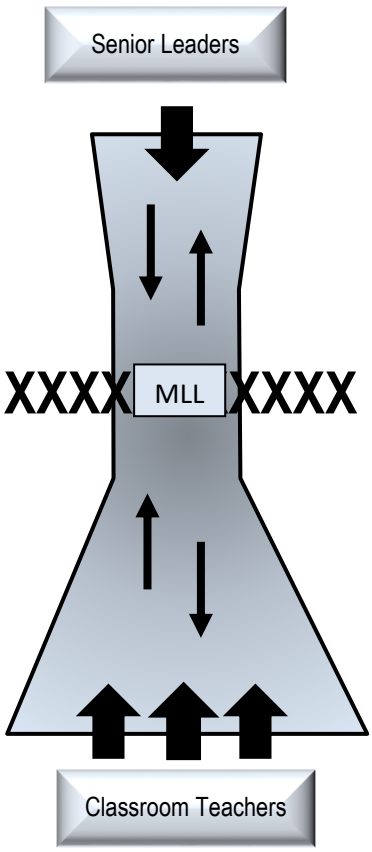

Figure 2.2 *Middle Level Leader as Conduit or Pipeline*

This diagram synthesises the various notions expressed in the literature of the middle level leader as bridge and buffer (Bennett et al., 2003), conduit (Brown & Rutherford, 1999; Brown, Rutherford, et al., 2000; Fitzgerald, 2009; Jarvis, 2008; White, 2002) and link (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009; Koh, Gurr, Drsysdale, & Ang, 2011; Weller, 2001; White, 2000). Table 2.10 summarises key points from this section.

Table 2.10

Synthesis: Role Identity

- The literature is not always consistent with respect to middle level leaders' role identity.
- Middle level leaders play a conduit or bridging role between senior leaders and classroom teachers – translating and transmitting the vision into action.
- Middle level leaders often feel "caught" or "stuck" in the middle.
- Middle level leaders play an advocacy role with their classroom teacher faculty members.

The next section describes middle level leaders' experiences of role tension, conflict and ambiguity.

Role tension, role conflict and role ambiguity.

The differing expectations that principals and senior leaders and faculty team members place on middle level leaders potentially give rise to specific tensions (Hammond, 2000), conflict and ambiguity (Wise, 2001). These tensions have a potential to impact on the role identity, as middle level leaders straddle dual accountabilities as both classroom teacher as well as being a leader of others in a faculty (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009). They also add to the notion of the sandwich role mentioned earlier, with the middle level

leader potentially caught in an invidious position between colleagues, many of whom they see as their professional peers, and the senior leaders in the school who have more positional power and influence than the middle level leaders themselves. Some middle level leaders are reported as feeling torn between conflicting agendas of accountability, with them being unsure as to whether they are primarily accountable to senior leaders or accountable to their faculty members (Fitzgerald, 2009).

Brooks and Cavanagh (2009) cite tension as being an inherent part of leadership and in this sense, tension also becomes apparent between completing administrative duties and teacher responsibilities. With a slightly different emphasis, Bennett et al. (2007) have found tensions sometimes arising between middle level leaders from different faculties as they engage in conflict and competition, often when attempting to “chase” resources. At times, these tensions and conflicts between faculties can lead to balkanisation according to Hannay and Ross (1999). This same sentiment is echoed by Poultney (2007). Balkanisation is a term that was adopted by Hargreaves and Macmillan (1992) to refer to the sub-groups that are often formed in secondary schools, usually along department or faculty lines, where isolation can become a negative influence on teaching and learning in the school in general as well as affecting school-wide culture:

> The balkanized form of teachers' culture, like all other forms, is defined by particular patterns of inter-relationships among teachers. In balkanized cultures, these patterns mainly consist of teachers working neither in isolation, nor with most of their colleagues as a whole

> school, but in smaller sub-groups within the school community, like secondary school subject departments, special needs units, or junior and primary divisions within the elementary school. (p. 3)

Brooks (2013) has found middle leaders experienced a lack of role clarity, limited role authority for some leaders, role tension and role conflict as well as an undervaluing of their work and notes that “a lack of clarity in the definition and scope of middle leadership positions was a concern of middle leaders” (p. 74). Further, she reports that “some middle leaders expressed a sense of frustration at having limited authority” (p. 79) such that, while many middle leaders derived satisfaction from their work, they have also experienced limitations and problems with their role.

Bennett et al. (2003), echoing an issue noted earlier, have reported two major tensions for middle level leaders. Firstly, tensions were apparent between the senior staff expectation that middle level leaders would play a whole-school role and the abiding belief among middle level leaders that their work was chiefly concerned with the department/faculty in which they worked. Secondly, tensions arose between the notion of the middle level leader acting as a line manager of staff and the belief in a collegial relationship with faculty team members. Brown, Rutherford, et al. (2000) have found similar tensions with respect to middle level leaders’ ambiguity over whether they were serving the needs of the faculty or working in a whole school sense:

> The priorities of heads of department need to be integrated with the priorities of the whole school and departmental beliefs and values need to mirror whole school beliefs and values. In two of the schools where the heads of department were actually members of the SMT [Senior Management Team] there appeared to be a greater understanding and appreciation of the link between whole-school issues and departmental issues. However these heads of department felt that the time spent on head of department and SMT business produced role ambiguity and led to issues of time constraint. (p. 254)

It appears that the changes and growth in expectations over time that middle level leaders make an active contribution to the wider school agenda has fostered such tensions (Poultney, 2007).

Relationships between middle level leaders and other groups in the school, particularly the senior leaders, also gives rise to potential conflict according to both Brown and Rutherford (1998) and Hobbs (2006). Hobbs argues that these relationships need review and clarification. Wise (2001) suggests that if conflict in the role is to be avoided “there needs to be much clearer communication of role expectations by all members within the role set. Senior managers need to communicate clearly to team members what their expectations are of academic middle managers and vice versa” (p. 340). Brown and Rutherford (1998) reinforce the importance of communication with senior leaders, suggesting that at times, there is a lack of communication and an accompanying lack of vision and direction from them.

As noted earlier, Poultney (2007) has found that middle level leaders were unclear about what their role entailed. Senior leaders in this study felt that middle level leaders were too busy and did not understand the work of the senior leadership team. Brooks and Cavanagh (2009) have similarly cited role ambiguity arising because middle level leaders in their study felt uncertain about the expectations of their position. A major source of role conflict that middle level leaders experience is the lack of time in which to complete the role (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009; Fitzgerald, 2009; Fletcher-Campbell, 2003; Poultney, 2007). Table 2.11 provides a summary of the points here.

Table 2.11

Synthesis: Role Tension, Conflict and Ambiguity

- Role tension can be experienced by middle level leaders as they:
  - straddle a dual role as both classroom teacher and leader of a faculty;
  - fulfil both administrative duties and teacher responsibilities; and,
  - juggle the development of collegial relationships while being a line manager.
- Role conflict and ambiguity can also be felt as middle level leaders grapple with differing expectations from senior leaders and classroom teachers.
- Better communication with senior leaders is seen as desirable.
- Conflict can be experienced among colleague middle level leaders as they advocate for their own faculty.
- Middle level leaders experience conflict as they battle with multiple expectations and suffer from a lack of available time.

Another area of difficulty for middle level leaders is the apparent contradiction of power and powerlessness in the role. This is explored in the next section.

Power and powerlessness.

With respect to role descriptions, the literature suggests some apparent contradictions regarding the notion of "power" in the role. Research indicates (Bennett et al., 2003; Hannay & Ross, 1999; Wise, 2001; Wise & Bush, 1999) that the role can be either an extremely powerful one or, conversely, the role can be beset by a sense of powerlessness with attendant lack of authority and autonomy. The research is unclear as to how power is afforded, and how it is distributed.

The culture that is embedded in subject departments or faculties is a powerful one according to Hannay and Ross (1999). Teachers possess a natural affinity for, and a sense of belonging to, their faculty as they share similar expertise and interests with colleagues (Brown & Rutherford, 1999; Brown, Rutherford, et al., 2000). Likewise, the middle level leader of the faculty is closely allied with, and linked to, this group. Poultney (2007) and Bennett et al. (2007) suggest that middle level leaders view themselves as professional equals with the members of the faculty. It appears that, when middle level leaders and faculty members are viewed as equals, there can be a sense of powerlessness experienced by middle level leaders who feel that they have little influence over their colleagues (Bennett et al., 2003) and also possess little decision-making power (Turner & Bolam, 1998). Gold (1998, as cited in Weller, 2001), however, argues that middle level leaders are potentially the most powerful people in the school if the role is well defined. In recent work, Leithwood (2016) purports that middle level leaders can exert significant leadership in school improvement, but that this potential is limited in some schools. Wise and Bush (1999) concur, stating that middle level

leaders exert a powerful influence over their colleagues in the department. A contrasting view is explored by Wise (2001), who posits that middle level leaders have influence exerted on their decision-making most powerfully by their team members. The literature suggests that where middle level leaders do have a notion of powerfulness and authority, it is as a result of their expertise and knowledge as a curriculum expert and as a classroom teacher, and not from a sense of holding any positional power as such (Bennett et al., 2003; Fitzgerald, 2009).

Brown and Rutherford (1999) regard the role as being an important one in bringing about change in the school whereas Bennett et al. (2007) suggest that middle level leaders can be a barrier to change. Should the middle level leaders not agree with change that is passed down from senior leaders for them to implement, they can stall or block it. In this way, middle level leaders can manoeuvre themselves into a potentially very powerful position.

Finally, Jarvis's (2008) research indicates that middle level leaders felt a sense of powerlessness: a sense of impotence in their relationships; a lack of influence with their team members; and, with collegiality being used as a convenient term to mask the lack of leadership displayed by role holders. This notion of power and powerlessness raises issues of role authority and autonomy, which is discussed in the next section. Table 2.12 summarises key points here.

Table 2.12

Synthesis: Power and Powerlessness

- The role can be paradoxically both powerful and powerless:
  - powerful in that middle level leaders can exert power over their faculty classroom teachers and can be powerful in either supporting or blocking change at the faculty level; and,
  - powerless in that they can often exert little influence over their colleagues.

Role authority and autonomy.

The degree to which middle level leaders feel that they have or do not have power in their role influences the degree to which they feel that they have autonomy and authority to carry out their role. Hammond (2000) and Weller (2001) have suggested that middle level leaders felt that they had little formal authority or line management authority with Weller (2001) reporting that 68% of respondents in his study indicated that they had a "lack of line authority to accomplish their assigned tasks" (p. 76). Interestingly, Hobbs (2006) found that middle level leaders felt they had some autonomy in their role but felt a lack of recognition from their senior leaders with Lee and Dimmock (1999) reporting that middle level leaders enjoyed a high degree of autonomy. There are calls in the literature for the empowerment of middle level leaders (Brown & Rutherford, 1998; Foster, 2010) by senior leaders in order for them to have the requisite authority and autonomy to contribute as widely as possible to the goals of the school (Mercer, Barker & Bird, 2010, as cited in Smith et al., 2013). Whether middle level leaders hold power or indeed feel powerless, their degree of autonomy and authority comes not from their formal position, but more so from a mediated sense of authority that arises out of a reputation

as a quality classroom teacher and with expert subject knowledge (Bennett et al., 2007).

Francis (2007) tracked the work of middle level leaders in schools that were deemed to be failing according to the inspection regime instituted by the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) in England. Francis has found that middle level leaders' role descriptions were largely task driven and often inadequate in nature. In order to improve school learning outcomes, middle level leader roles were redefined together with descriptions of how middle leaders and senior leaders would work together. Middle level leaders were seen as fundamental to school improvement efforts. The empowerment of middle level leaders in the study is an example of the authority of middle level leaders being used to bring about desired change in a school environment. In another study where academic standards were questioned, middle level leaders in Johannesburg, South Africa participated in a study by Smith et al. (2013). In contrast to the research of Francis, this research revealed that middle level leaders felt that they had limited authority and were restricted in performing their role due to growing administrative duties consuming their time. In addition to desiring more autonomy and authority to carry out their roles effectively, these middle level leaders also expressed a need to be professionally developed and skilled in leading the instruction and learning in their schools. Brooks (2013) reports that middle level leaders in her study were also desirous of increased authority and autonomy to "more directly influence broader changes and decisions within the schools community." (p. 80)

Despite the paradoxical nature of role descriptions and the subsequent lived reality for middle level leaders, the role is one that holds much potential. In a recent study, Moir, Hattie, and Jansen (2014) have found that classroom teachers identified strongly with their subject department and had far more dealings with their head of department than they did with their principal. These findings point to the middle level leader role as a crucial one, with a strong need to provide clarity of role description and role delineation. In this way, the lived experience of the role might more closely match the role as described both verbally and in writing, to unleash leadership potential that perhaps, at present, lies dormant in some schools. Table 2.13 summarises key points here.

Table 2.13

Synthesis: Role Authority and Autonomy

- The degree of authority and autonomy that middle level leaders enjoy is often governed by their expertise and knowledge as a classroom teacher.
- Middle level leaders report desiring additional authority and autonomy to contribute to decision-making in the school.
- The middle level leader role is a crucial one with a need to provide clarity of role description and role delineation.
- There is untapped (leadership – curriculum, staff, whole-school) potential in the role.

The next section explores how the role of a middle level leader has changed over time.

2.3.3 Evolution of and changes to the role.

As previously noted, middle level leaders are seen by many as important agents in bringing about change and in promoting the learning in a school (Brown & Rutherford, 1999). While it is now generally accepted that quality of school leadership makes a difference to student learning outcomes (Bush, 2009), the literature generally falls short of providing evidence of how middle level leaders have a direct impact on improvements in student learning (Jarvis, 2008; Turner & Bolam, 1998). Indeed Harris (2001, as cited in Poultney, 2007) has noted that “while the links between school improvement and the increasing role of the Subject Leader has been evidenced, the nature of subject leadership is still under debate” (p.8). What is clear is that the nature of the middle level leadership role has changed and continues to change (Brown & Rutherford, 1998; Rosenfeld et al., 2009; White, 2002) and evolve (Foster, 2010; Kerry, 2005; Rosenfeld, 2008).

There is general agreement that the role has grown, the workload has increased and has become more complex and demanding (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009; Dinham, 2007) but with little extra time in which to carry out the role (Wise & Bush, 1999). As noted already in this chapter, the literature from the UK in particular points to the shift in the role that has seen middle level leaders moving from being almost exclusively responsible only for their own faculties, to participating more in whole school policy formation and strategic agendas (Adey, 2000; National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services, 2011; Poultney, 2007) and requiring them to take a more active role in monitoring and observing the performance of staff (Bennett et al., 2003; Hobbs, 2006; Wise, 2001). In this regard, however,

Brown et al. (2002) note from their research that middle level leaders experienced frustration because they were not afforded the opportunity to contribute to whole school planning and decision-making. Similarly, from an Australian perspective, Brooks and Cavanagh (2009) have argued that middle level leaders have not been afforded the opportunity to engage more in whole school planning or strategic development and subsequently, they have felt undervalued and unrecognised. This is further supported by Brooks (2013) who suggests there is “the need for greater acknowledgement, recognition and perhaps remuneration of middle leaders” (p. 81). The next section discusses the extent to which middle level leaders are involved in classroom observation and monitoring.

Classroom observation and monitoring.

Classroom observation generally refers to viewing the lessons of others as they teach, in order to support teachers in their work to improve practice (New South Wales Government, 2012), whereas classroom monitoring suggests observing lessons in a supervisory way in order to draw conclusions about the performance of the teacher (Wise, 2001). It appears from the literature that classroom observations are often suggested as a means of supervising the work of classroom teachers. The emphasis, from an Australian perspective, as reported in the Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2012), is to provide teachers with regular feedback on their performance to improve teaching quality. One of the suggested ways of providing valuable feedback is through regular formal lesson observation. Lesson observation is one of the methods of collecting evidence of effective

teacher practice, as described below. The document (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2012) offers this advice:

> An effective approach to improving practice will include a conscious effort to collect and reflect on evidence that provides insight into the effectiveness of teacher practice, and informs growth and access to high quality professional learning. This should occur in a context of frequent formal and informal feedback. (p. 6)

Classroom observation of colleagues is a contentious point for middle level leaders as some do not see it as being a part of their role (Wise, 2001). Others acknowledge that it is, but many are reluctant to engage in the practice (Smith et al., 2013). The reasons for this reluctance are varied, but include feeling that they do not have the right to judge experienced teachers (nor do they feel comfortable or confident in doing so) (Bennett et al., 2003; Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014), or that it breaches trust and collegiality among equals (Bennett et al., 2007) or that they do not have the time. Earley and Fletcher-Campbell (1989) agree with the time challenges that the role presents, but add that even if time were to be made available, many middle level leaders would not use it for the purpose of classroom observation. Hobbs (2006), in a study in one large secondary school in England, suggests that middle level leaders understood their role in engaging in classroom teaching observations, but simply did not do it. Hobbs reports that this represents a “reality-rhetoric gap” (p. 16) whereby middle level leaders felt more accountable for teaching and learning and sharing of pedagogical practice but that the “vast majority of support and monitoring of staff took

place outside of the classroom" (p. 16). Similarly, monitoring or observing colleague teachers, according to Wise (2001), often only takes place on an informal basis.

Some schools have instituted formal monitoring as a means of improving teacher quality and improving student learning outcomes (Francis, 2007), with some evidence pointing to middle level leaders now being encouraged to engage in lesson observation in Australian schools (De Nobile & Ridden, 2014; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013; New South Wales Government, 2012). The next section deals with both the managerial and leadership aspects of the role, and examines whether middle level leaders either lead or manage, or engage in both activities. In addition, the unfulfilled potential of middle level leaders is raised as an issue for consideration.

Middle level leaders: leaders, managers and unfulfilled potential.

As earlier discussion suggests, in the past, middle level leaders were often termed 'middle managers' (Bennett, 1999), with a role to implement the policies of senior leaders and manage resources as opposed to leading people (Glover & Miller, 1999). Now, the role has evolved in some cases into something substantially more, where the expectations include middle level leaders leading in matters relating to classroom practice and instructional leadership (Bendikson et al., 2012). Indeed, some have argued that their leadership role should be even wider than this (Foster, 2010; White, 2002). While there may be an increasing interest in the role, the work of Jarvis

(2008) from his case study research in three schools came to the blunt and sobering conclusion that:

> The head of department role as currently constituted represents something of a 'missed opportunity' for leadership. It should be absolutely central to the delivery of any school's primary mission, but comes across as mired in confusion, timidity and obfuscation. Even those who hold the post are unable to conceive of it as anything more than managerial in orientation and the actual work of teaching and learning is hardly touched by it all. (p. 29)

The literature also recognises that some middle level leaders do not in fact see themselves as leaders at all (Fletcher-Campbell, 2003; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). In two separate studies, both Weller (2001), in researching department heads, and Cranston (2006), in researching the deputy principal role, found that role holders in both cases represented an underutilised opportunity for leadership, where middle level leaders' roles were essentially "stuck" in administration and management either by their own limitations and/or preferences or the demands placed upon them by senior leaders in the school. Weller (2001) reports that school leaders "often do not fully utilize department heads' leadership potential to improve instruction and promote student learning" (p. 80).

Reporting on a six-year research project on school leadership, primarily concerned with the principal role, Wahlstrom et al. (2010) make the unequivocal call for the role to be completely redefined so that principals can,

through the vehicle of middle level leaders, improve the level and quality of instructional leadership that takes place in secondary schools:

> The role of department head in secondary schools should be radically redefined. Department heads should be regarded, institutionally, as a central resource for improving instruction in middle and high schools. Our evidence confirms the managerial role in which many department heads are now entrenched. Relegating them exclusively to a managerial role amounts to a great waste of a potential resource for instructional improvement. A radical redefinition of the role would help school districts solve the historical problem of inertia in secondary schools. (p. 92)

In a study exploring the role of heads of department in schools achieving exceptional academic outcomes in New South Wales, Australia, Dinham (2007) has found that regardless of the gender, age, subject department, or location of the middle level leaders in these schools, they were underutilised and largely unrecognised resources who were regarded in some ways as “hidden treasures” (p. 77). It is clear from the literature that there is scope for the unfulfilled potential of middle level leaders to be better realised in schools. Table 2.14 provides a summary of the key points raised in this section.

Table 2.14

Synthesis: Role Changes and Unfulfilled Potential

- The literature does not provide evidence of how middle level leaders impact on student learning.
- The role has changed, grown and evolved: workload has increased, it is more complex and demanding but time allocation has not improved.
- The requirement to participate in whole school agendas has also become apparent.
- Monitoring and observing staff performance is a contentious matter for middle level leaders with some not seeing this as part of their role.
- Some middle level leaders do not view themselves as leaders at all.
- The role as it is currently conceived and practised represents a missed opportunity for leadership with unfulfilled potential being apparent.

The next section explores the aspirations that role holders may have to further leadership positions in schools.

Aspirations to further leadership roles.

As experience in the role grows, some middle level leaders aspire to further opportunities to lead. Although this is an area that has been largely ignored in the research (Turner & Sykes, 2007), as baby boomer principals and assistant principals approach retirement (Rhodes & Brundrett, 2009), it could be expected that the pool of future senior leaders would come from the middle leadership tier (Cranston, 2007). Aspirations to further leadership positions are likely to be influenced by a number of factors, including the way in which more senior posts are viewed by others (Cranston, 2007). In this regard, most writers argue that it is the responsibility of current leaders to

display positive perceptions about the role and to provide the right talent identification (Powell, 2012), capacity building and role modelling in order to ensure that there is a sufficient pool from which to draw this next generation of leaders (Bezzina, 2012).

In time, some middle level leaders could be expected to aspire to and inevitably be promoted to senior leadership roles, including assistant principal and eventually principal positions. Others will see their career role as a middle level leader, with evidence from the literature on assistant and deputy principals suggesting that for some, they are quite happy to remain in their current substantive role, with little aspiration to further leadership (Shore, 2009, 2015). In a similar fashion to the role that is often ascribed to middle level leaders, a cautionary note is warranted for the future if we are to avoid seeing those in the assistant principal role repeating their experience at the middle leadership level where routinised, administrative and lower order tasks are the prime concerns of the position (Jarvis, 2008). In this regard, earlier research by Cranston et al. (2004) paints a fairly sobering picture of the deputy principalship whereby deputy principals engaged in routine tasks that did not pave the ground for promotion to the principal role and leadership activity was not readily apparent. They also report that there was a lack of alignment between what deputy principals actually did in a given week compared with what they would rather be doing in an ideal week. Operational matters and student issues were key aspects of their week which consumed much of their time whereas strategic leadership and educational/curriculum leadership would ideally be given a much higher priority. Cranston et al. conclude that their “research has identified that there are some critical

matters, such as role alignment between what deputy principals do, what they want, and what they are expected to do, that present potential barriers to schools achieving maximised effectiveness" (p. 241).

McCulla (2012) reports that those potentially aspiring towards middle level leadership positions from the classroom teaching role are often negatively influenced by the perception that they will be pulled away from their central passion viz., the classroom and teaching and learning. In addition, for many females, it has been argued that family comes before professional ambition (Fletcher-Campbell, 2003). There is some evidence to suggest that middle level leaders express a reluctance to move in to more senior roles because of the workload and the responsibility of the job (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009). From the work of both Powell (2012) and Rhodes and Brundrett (2009), it appears that one of the keys to promoting aspiration to further leadership is by demystifying leadership roles. To that end, networking, coaching and mentoring opportunities can prove useful in achieving this.

From a Catholic school perspective, d'Arbon, Duignan and Duncan (2002), d'Arbon and Cunliffe (2007), and Canavan (2007) all report on an initiative instituted at the Catholic Education Office in the Archdiocese of Sydney over a number of years in the early 2000s. This initiative aimed at improving the pool of potential aspirants for leadership succession arising out of data that revealed a dearth of young teachers in the Archdiocesan school system who were desirous of promotion to the principalship (d'Arbon et al., 2002). The initiative culminated in a "Leaders for the Future" project to ensure not only a decent pool of potential leaders, but also those who were "attentive to the

mission of the Catholic Church in education" (d'Arbon & Cunliffe, 2007, p. 79). Again the literature noted above points to the additional dimension of leadership in a faith-based context that perhaps contributes to the reticence of staff to entertain aspiration to further leadership in an already complex leadership milieu. Table 2.15 summarises the key points from this section.

Table 2.15

Synthesis: Aspirations to Further Leadership

- There is little research conducted on the aspirations of middle level leaders to further leadership roles.
- Talent identification and role modelling is important in attracting people to senior leadership roles.
- There is some evidence to suggest that potential future leaders are put off by the apparent workload, stress and impingement on family life.
- A key to promoting leadership is to demystify the role and to provide appropriate networking, coaching and mentoring.

The next section explores the fourth research question: the ways in which principals' expectations align with those holding the role.

2.3.4 Expectations of middle level leaders.

One of the research questions posed in this thesis is concerned with the alignment of expectations about the role among middle level leaders and their principals, an under-researched area. As already noted, the literature identifies that there is some apparent and at times, stark disparity with regard to the expectations that principals and senior leaders have of their middle level leaders. This can include for example, the principal expecting that middle level leaders will contribute to whole school policy and planning and

leading change at this level, whereas middle level leaders generally expect that their role is confined within the faculty (Rosenfeld et al., 2009).

Staff development is another area where principals feel that middle level leaders have an important role to play, whereas many middle level leaders themselves do not consider this to be part of their role (Adey, 2000; Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989). Rosenfeld (2008) has identified that middle level leaders in his study saw their role being balanced between curriculum and whole school matters whereas principals perceived that they would be leading a group of teachers, but not necessarily bound by their department. In contrast, Francis (2007) reports some agreement between principals and middle level leaders about the positive contribution that middle level leaders play in school improvement.

Differences in perceptions about expectations between deputy principals and middle level leaders were stark in the study conducted by Brown, Rutherford, et al. (2000) where deputy principals were critical of the work of middle level leaders. The deputies suggested that their middle level leaders lacked charisma, did not contribute to whole school endeavours and had a history of not working together. They also suggested that some middle level leaders created personal empires for themselves within their departments. The four deputy principals in this particular study provided a vastly different picture of the role than the middle level leaders themselves in the same schools, with the deputy principals being far more critical of the middle level leaders than the middle level leaders were of themselves.

The literature typically concentrates on the expectations of middle level leadership from the point of view of those holding the role, or usually the superordinates of middle level leaders such as deputy and assistant principals or principals, with the views of classroom teachers about their middle level leaders given little attention. Jarvis (2008) conducted a study where classroom teacher views about their middle level leaders were explicitly sought, and found that most classroom teachers were not able to adequately describe the role of middle level leaders. They were ignorant about the ways in which middle level leaders led and instead, felt that they were not being led. Notably, they also reported that their head of department had very little influence on their classroom practice, if any at all:

> The question which really penetrated to the heart of this research was that of how far the classroom practice of the department members was influenced or conditioned by the leadership of their heads of department. In almost every case, the answer was very little. (Jarvis, 2008, p. 28)

Table 2.16 provides a summary of the main points from this section.

Table 2.16

Synthesis: Expectations of Middle Level Leaders

- There is some disparity of expectations between principals and middle level leaders.
- Most notably, principals would like middle level leaders to be more involved in contributing to whole-school, strategic matters.
- The expectations that classroom teachers hold of middle level leaders is under-researched.

The next section provides an overview of the emerging issues arising from the literature.

2.4 Overview of Issues Emerging from the Literature – the Conceptual Framework for the Study

This section provides an overview of the issues that have emerged from the literature about middle level leadership. These issues are synthesised in a conceptual framework which is presented diagrammatically. This diagram is informed by the literature and identifies the silences in the research.

As previously noted, the literature reveals that, while there has been some increased interest in the role of middle level leaders in recent years, this research is still quite limited, with only a few in-depth studies being conducted in Australian schooling contexts. It appears that there is still some confusion about what middle level leaders actually do in their role, and how they and others construe the role. There is little in the literature on the expectations that principals have of their middle level leaders, yet what is clear from the research is that there is often a gap between what middle level leaders expect of themselves in the role compared with what others expect.

The literature also points to the role having changed and evolved, with middle level leaders now expected to take on additional tasks and responsibilities. Time in which to complete these responsibilities is an issue and a good deal of their role seems to revolve around low level, day-to-day administrative tasks. Middle level leaders often act as a buffer or conduit, mediating

between senior leaders and classroom team members. In this position, they paradoxically feel both powerless and powerful. If middle level leaders are pivotal to the learning agenda in schools, then their role clearly warrants closer investigation and clarity of role description. In many cases, a reconceptualisation of the role would see them as being instrumental in bringing about improvements in student learning. Indeed, there is a strong sense of unfulfilled (leadership – curriculum, staff, whole-school) potential in the role as it is currently conceived and practised in many schools.

The preparation and training that middle level leaders receive prior to taking up their role and the professional development that is afforded them once they are in the role are also issues for further exploration. Typically, middle level leaders receive little formal training and often take on the role because they have demonstrated expertise in a particular curriculum area (Rosenfeld, 2008). Some have argued that it is time for the profession to provide explicit support so that the capacity of this leadership group can be improved (Toop, 2012) and the unfulfilled potential in the role able to be realised.

Figure 2.3 represents a conceptual framework that has been developed to highlight the key findings from the literature in understanding the role of a middle level leader. It details the current view of the role (on the left hand side of the framework), highlighting the tensions that are inherent in the role. These are contrasted (on the right hand side of the framework) with the potential future of the role, with the possibility for new understandings to be revealed about the role. The research questions in the thesis are based on, and explore, those areas that are currently under-researched, where the

research is contested or unclear, or where further research about middle level leadership is warranted. They are placed in the centre of the framework in order to represent the potential for what the research may reveal about the role. Tensions of unfulfilled potential may be revealed through an increased understanding of what the role *could* possibly look like in the future, taking care to account for local context and individual school and personnel needs. The research questions are framed to provide further insights with respect to these potential new understandings about middle level leadership.

A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Role of Middle Level Leaders (MLLs): Current Realities and Potential Future Understandings

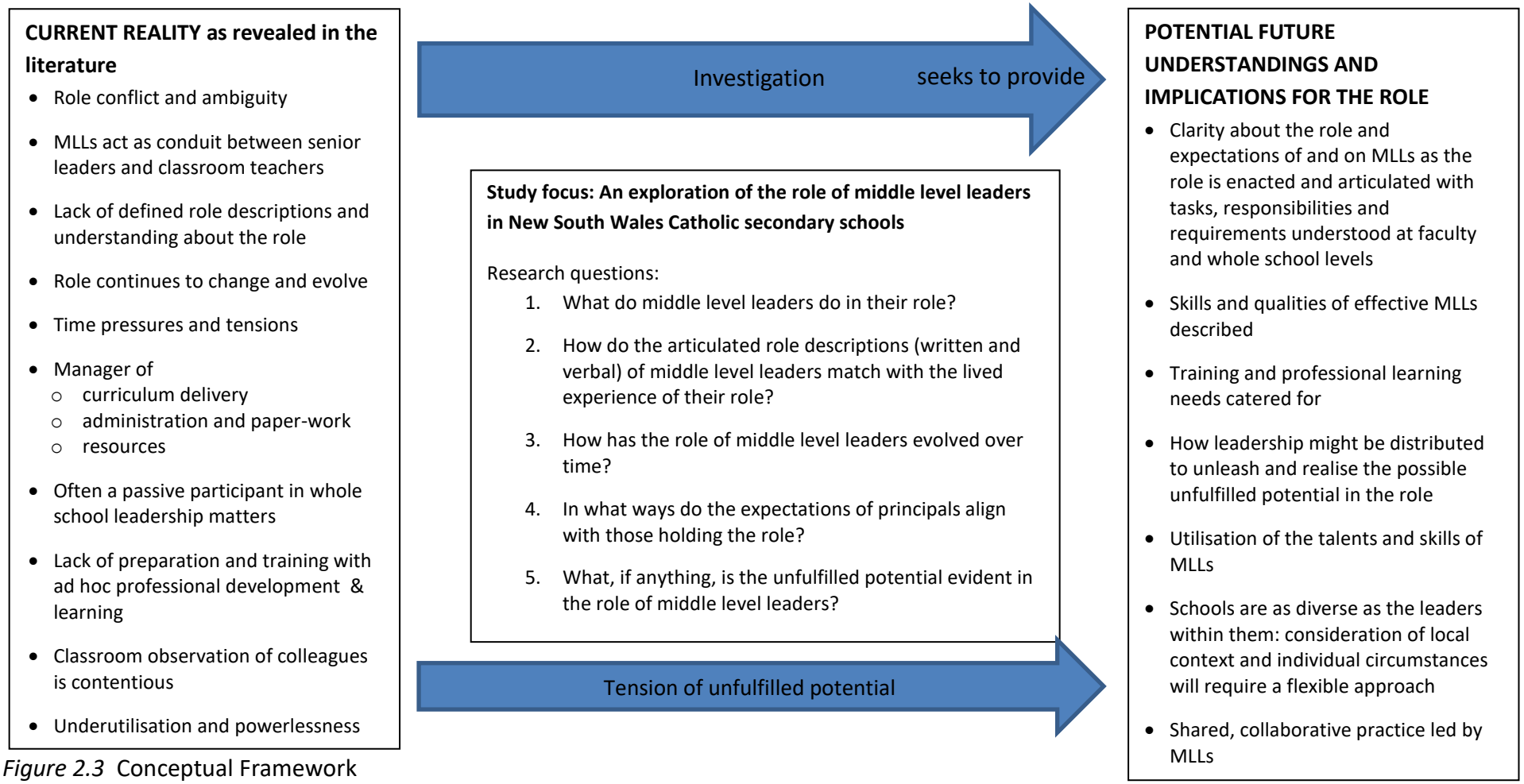

Figure 2.3 Conceptual Framework

2.5 Chapter Summary

The conceptual framework provides the focus and scope for the research to be undertaken in this study. The literature review (synthesised in the Conceptual Framework) provides a snapshot of what the current understandings of the role are and how the research questions posed in this study aim to lead to better understandings about the role and the implications for the future, particularly in an Australian schooling context.

Middle level leadership is a fundamental role in secondary schools. It is long established particularly with respect to faculty or department leadership and is structurally well understood in terms of where it sits in a school's organisational hierarchy, both in Australia and in many other countries. The lack of clarity or agreement around what constitutes the role, the ambiguous and blurred nature of the definition of the role, and the expectations of those holding the role are all key issues that have been identified as areas warranting further research. As it stands, the role as it is currently understood by many is one where middle level leaders feel underutilised and hence, where unfulfilled potential resides with respect to how the role may be better understood and enacted to contribute to quality teaching and learning. In addition, the preparation for taking up the role and the professional development needs of those exercising the role are also key considerations for research.

Drawing on the conceptual framework developed here, the next chapter describes the research methodology that has been employed in investigating

the role of secondary school middle level leaders in one regional NSW Catholic diocese.

Chapter Three

Theoretical Underpinnings of the Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the rationale and the justifications for the research methodology employed in the conduct of this study. It describes the connections between the research perspective that has been adopted and the focus area of the study. Commentary is provided on the overall design, data collection methods and analysis strategies that have been used. The following chapter provides details of the methodology in action for this particular study.

Firstly, the theoretical framework is described, then the theoretical perspective, followed by the methodology and research methods employed. A description of the data analysis then follows, with discussion of issues of ethics, the criteria for judging the quality of the study and limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with an overview of the research design.

As previously outlined, this study has explored the lived experiences of eight middle level leaders in Catholic NSW secondary schools each of whom operated within their own context: while NSW schools have many similarities, they also have many of their own particular characteristics. The study sought an understanding of, and insight into, the role of middle level leaders through a multiple case study approach, where exploration of the roles, the expectations of middle level leaders in their roles and how the role has

evolved in recent years, were examined. The case study approach was adopted as the researcher sought to learn something about these aspects of the role through the voices of middle level leaders and their principals. Being centred around a key focus, this study has employed five research questions to guide the research (Kervin, Vialle, Herrington, & Okely, 2006).

Focus of the study:

An exploration of the role of middle level leaders in NSW Catholic secondary schools

Research questions:

1. What do middle level leaders do in their role?
2. How do the articulated role descriptions (written and verbal) of middle level leaders match with the lived experience of their role?
3. How has the role of middle level leaders evolved over time?
4. In what ways do the expectations of principals align with those holding the role?
5. What, if anything, is the unfulfilled potential evident in the role of middle level leaders?

3.2 Theoretical Framework

In arriving at an appropriate theoretical framework for the conduct of this study, it was firstly important to locate it in the context of an over-arching paradigm or epistemology. This epistemology has served to inform the research and link it to the theoretical perspective and research methodology employed. Table 3.1 describes the theoretical framework that has been

adopted. Each element of this framework will then be discussed as it applies to this research study.

Table 3.1

Theoretical Framework

Epistemology	Social Constructionism
Theoretical Perspective	Interpretivism
Methodology	Qualitative multiple case study
Methods	In-depth Interviews Focus Groups Document Study

According to Morrison (2012b), epistemology is central to all research activity. Everyone who engages in research does so in order to find out information and to seek some new understanding or knowledge (Creswell, 2008). The ways in which we come to know things are many and varied, and how we come to arrive at knowledge is the subject of different epistemologies (Crotty, 1998). Crotty defines epistemology as “the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology” (p. 3). An epistemology is a way of looking at the world. Not surprisingly, there are many ways of doing that (Crotty, 1998). When applied to research however, the way that knowledge is construed was once simply thought of in one of two particular ways: either as positivist or constructivist (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Positivism is most often associated with quantitative research and seeks to achieve research reliability. This is not particularly helpful when it comes to conducting qualitative research (Simons, 2009).

The opposite pairing of positivism and constructivism was vastly expanded in the 1990s and subsequent decades to include epistemologies such as postpositivism, pragmatism, feminism and others (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Crotty (1998), however, suggests that positivism is a *theoretical perspective* that has grown out of the epistemology of objectivism. He argues that objectivism, constructionism and subjectivism are the chief epistemologies and stresses the importance of making clear distinctions between the categories. He further asserts that interpretivism is a theoretical perspective that grows out of the epistemology of constructionism in the same way that positivism grows out of the epistemology of objectivism, i.e., the theoretical perspective is embodied within the over-arching theory of knowledge known as the epistemology. Interpretivism will be further discussed in 3.2.2 of this chapter. The epistemology informs the theoretical perspective.

Positivism and constructivism pit knowledge and understanding as either seen as being objectively true and held to be true (positivism); that is, knowledge exists and we as humans need to discover it or knowledge is constructed by people as they seek to make meaning according to their values, context and time frame. In other words, knowledge is a social construct (constructivism) (Crotty, 1998). It is the latter world view or epistemology that is most suited to qualitative case study methodology such as this one, as qualitative research seeks to understand the experiences of the participants in the study (Creswell, 2008). A qualitative study examines and describes the lives of people in a particular context and investigates some phenomenon in order to better understand it (Marshall & Rossman,

2016). It is therefore important to articulate the epistemology, the perspective and the methodology adopted. Babbie (2011) asserts that if the epistemology is about how we come to “know” things, then methodology is about how we come to find out about those things.

According to Crotty (1998), a theoretical perspective informs the methodology and provides a philosophical stance for the process to be employed, with the methodology being the strategy or the plan of action. Crotty further states that “this methodology links the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes” (p. 3). Lastly, the methods are the techniques or procedures that are used to gather and analyse the data that are collected in the research (Crotty, 1998).

3.2.1 Constructionism.

Some theorists have used the term constructivism (Creswell, 2008; Dimmock & Lam, 2012; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) to describe research that places the participant at the centre, where their views and thoughts combine to construct meaning making. Alongside the participant is the researcher who also contributes to the construction of the knowledge base as a fellow participant (Morrison, 2012a). The terms “constructivism” and “constructionism” are used interchangeably by some in the literature (Andrews, 2012). Others draw distinctions between them (Crotty, 1998). Often the references to both constructs use technical language that is complex and unhelpful (Efran, McNamee, Warren, & Raskin, 2014), leading some theorists to suggest that constructionism is often subsumed under the term of constructivism more generally (Andrews, 2012). It is argued by some

that the differences between the two constructs are largely to do with social factors: constructivism on the one hand focuses on individuals and how they come to construe meaning about knowledge, whereas constructionism is more about the shared nature of the construction of meaning as a collective (Andrews, 2012; Crotty, 1998).

Social constructionism then is concerned with how we make sense of our world and how human beings come to make meaning from their existence (Crotty, 1998). What we come to understand of our experiences is constructed by the individual, and meaning is made out of this experience in the interaction that we have with others (Andrews, 2012). Our responses to life experiences will be coloured by our previous understandings and experiences and the influence that our "culture" has on us (Crotty, 1998). No two human beings will necessarily have the same response to an experience (Crotty, 1998). More particularly, Crotty (1998) refers to 'social constructionism' whereby the focus of meaning making resides in "the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning" (p. 58). Andrews (2012) makes these observations: "social constructionism places great emphasis on everyday interactions between people and how they use language to construct their reality" (p. 6). It is for these reasons that a constructionist approach was best suited to this research study where the roles of middle level leaders were explored in their different school settings (culture and context), experiences in the role and interactions with people in the school. Their use of language in their responses and interpretations of those experiences was uncovered through the in-depth interviews.

3.2.2 Theoretical perspective.

According to Crotty (1998), a theoretical perspective provides “the philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria” (p. 3). Generally, positivism and interpretivism are seen as the predominant paradigms within this philosophical standpoint (Crotty, 1998). In brief, positivism stems from a scientific and therefore quantitative background while interpretivism is favoured by qualitative researchers (Kervin et al., 2006).

From an epistemology of social constructionism, an interpretivist perspective best suited this particular research study. Interpretivism is about research *with* others, not just research *about* others (Morrison, 2012b), whereby meaning is constructed in different ways. Such a study locates the researcher in the work, to the point that they become a part of it together with the subjects of the research, seeking to gather information from the point of view of others (Crotty, 1998). The approach, therefore, has been taken from the point of view of seeking to learn and better understand the world of the middle level leader participants as they have gone about their work. The role of the researcher has been to continually try to make sense of the data by engaging with it (Morrison, 2012b), and to put aside any personal preconceptions and to be open to the emerging phenomena from the study (Crotty, 1998). This research can be said to contain a phenomenological perspective within the interpretivist paradigm. Crotty (1998) places phenomenology firmly in the theoretical perspective of interpretivism, as phenomenological study “requires us to engage with phenomena in our world and make sense of them directly and immediately” (p. 79). Qualitative

research is well served by an approach that “seeks to make sense of social phenomena as they occur in natural settings” (Kervin et al., 2006, p. 37). In short, qualitative research has been adopted as it is suited to the overall focus and research questions of this study. It is also highly personal research as it allows the researcher to examine an issue through the eyes of the “cases” in an in-depth way (Stake, 1995).

3.2.3 Research methodology.

The research methodology outlines the plan of action or the strategy that sits behind the methods that are employed, making links between the methods and the outcomes that are desired (Crotty, 1998). The methodology provides the rationale for the methods adopted (Morrison, 2012b). This study adopted a multiple case study methodology. A case study, according to Creswell (2007, as cited in Creswell, 2008), “is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system based on extensive data collection” (p. 476). The bounded system simply refers to a separation of the case for research with respect to time, place or some other boundaries. In this context, the cases were the middle level leaders selected for participation in the research and the bounded system the schools in which they worked. More broadly, the bounded system was located in the Catholic secondary school sector in a regional (NSW) diocese. Data collection for this study was extensive, with in-depth interviews, focus groups and document analyses being conducted.

A case study approach allows the researcher to get to know the participants well and for them to feel comfortable in telling their stories in as rich a way as possible. Each of the eight participants in the study represented an individual

‘case’ to be studied. Kervin et al. (2006) note that case study can be descriptive where “the researcher describes the person or organisation in sufficient detail for others to understand the particular context” (p. 70). In addition, Kervin et al. argue that case study can also be explanatory, where the emphasis is on trying to explain why things are the way they are. As such, this study is both descriptive and explanatory as it has sought to provide rich description of the lives of middle level leaders in Catholic secondary schools, and lead to better understandings of how and what impacted on the ways their roles played out in practice.

The chief method of gathering the research data was through in-depth interviews (individual and focus group), where middle level leaders’ stories were documented individually in the first instance, with cross-case analysis undertaken subsequently. In selecting multiple participants (cases), the research has examined the experiences of a variety of middle level leaders, working in different contexts and with different experiences, capacities and interests. Each of these middle level leaders brought their own backgrounds, biases, strengths and opinions about their roles to the research process. The uniqueness of each was explored together with a cross-case analysis of the common understandings and similarities that the participants experienced in the exercising of their role in their school. The uniqueness of each context is important to note, as each middle level leader worked in a different school environment, echoing Marshall and Rossman’s (2016) notion that context is an important dynamic in conducting case study research. Case study though amounts to more than participant observation according to Yin (2009). It seeks to understand a real-life phenomenon in an in-depth way (Yin, 2009)

by employing comprehensive and extensive data collection. This study moved beyond participant observation described above, by learning about the individual cases in their own school context, over many months and with ample opportunity to examine the phenomenon of their roles as practised in different school settings. The nature of the multiple case study allowed for a collective understanding of the issue (Simons, 2009) of middle level leadership through learning about their lived experiences in the role.

Case study as a research methodology, however, is not without its critics, nor its shortcomings (Babbie, 2011; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). One of the chief criticisms of case study research is that by its very nature it is subjective. It is interpretive research drawing very much on personalised views about the issues under investigation. However, all experience is by its very nature subjective (Babbie, 2011) and we can only view the world through our own lens. Stake (1995), an advocate of case study, also acknowledges some shortcomings of case study research, including the length of time it takes, its labour intensive nature, the risks to privacy for participants, as well as the fact that the findings of case study research are often esoteric in nature. In order to promote the quality of social research, Yin (2009) has developed a handy tool for judging its quality, according to four commonly used tests that are often employed in the field. These four tests are: construct validity; internal validity; external validity; and reliability. The second of these, internal validity, is not relevant to case study research according to Yin. As explained in Table 3.2, the relevant three tests to this study, posed by Yin are noted and the steps that were taken by the researcher to address possible shortcomings in the research.

Table 3.2

Avoiding Shortcomings: Yin's (2009) "Case Study Tactics" (p. 41)

Test	Case Study tactic	Description	Steps taken in this research study to attend to potential shortcomings
Construct validity	• Use multiple sources of evidence • Establish a chain of evidence • Have key informants review draft report	This is often criticised in case study research because it fails to develop operational measures and because data collection is subjective. In order to avoid these pitfalls the tactics (at left) are recommended.	• Multiple sources of evidence have been used including in-depth interviews, focus groups and documents study. • A chain of evidence has been kept including all interview transcripts, field notes, analysis and coding tables, word tables, quotes, cross-case analysis themes and researcher notes. • All participants, including focus group interviewees have had opportunities to read transcripts and make additions or changes at any time. • A critical friend has been used to read and comment on findings and conclusions drawn. • Close contact was kept with research supervisors to monitor and review work as it proceeded.
External validity	• Use replication logic in multiple case studies	This test asks the question: are the findings generalisable beyond the case study? Case study research relies on analytic generalisation – where the researcher seeks to generalise findings to a broader theory.	• The aim of this research was not to provide generalisations about middle level leadership, but to provide rich description of those middle level leaders who were participants in the study and to generalise more broadly about theories concerning middle level leadership as revealed in the literature. • The aim of case study research is more about particularisation than it is about generalisation (Stake, 1995).
Reliability	• Use case study protocol • Develop case study database	Reliability confirms that if the research were to be conducted again in a similar way, the same results would be found.	• Detailed documentation has been kept on the processes and procedures engaged with during the course of the research including extensive tables of data. • Trustworthiness as opposed to reliability has been sought in this study (Bassey, 2012).

In qualitative study, trustworthiness is seen to be a more appropriate measure of the research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) than reliability. Traditionally, reliability has focused on the need to produce similar results or findings if the study were to be repeated (Yin, 2009) whereas in qualitative research, we seek to "ensure that our interpretations of the data are 'trustworthy'" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 44). Bassey (2012) has argued that in order to ensure trustworthiness of case study research we need to consider the following questions:

- Has there been prolonged engagement with the data sources?
- Has there been persistent observation of emerging issues?
- Have data been adequately checked with their sources?
- Has there been sufficient triangulation of data leading to analytical statements?
- Has the working hypothesis, or evaluation, or emerging story been systematically tested against the analytical statements?
- Has a critical friend tried to challenge your findings thoroughly?
- Is the account of the research sufficiently detailed to give the reader confidence?
- Does the case record provide an adequate audit trail? (p. 168).

These questions provided a powerful reflective framework throughout the conduct of the study to ensure its trustworthiness. Commentary on each of these is provided in subsequent discussions.

3.2.4 Data collection.

The purpose of the data collection in this qualitative design was to discover in an in-depth way, the feelings, values, attitudes and views of the participants

(Kervin et al., 2006) about the key focus and the research questions of the study. This research heeded the views of Yin (2009), consistent with Bassey's (2012) questions noted above, regarding three principles of data collection:

1. Use multiple sources of evidence—the advantages of which include the opportunity to triangulate the data through different lines of inquiry. This study has employed three main different sources of evidence including interviews with eight middle level leaders and six principals, focus group sessions involving 14 additional middle level leaders, plus document analyses.
2. Create a case study database—the database collection from this study included annotated transcripts, field notes, coding, themes, and cross case analysis as well as quotes from participants to illustrate themes from different data sources. Documents have also been gathered and critically analysed.
3. Maintain a chain of evidence. This requires there to be a documented, logical progression from the initial research questions and data collection through to analysis, coding and conclusions. Figure 3.1 illustrates the chain of evidence in this study.

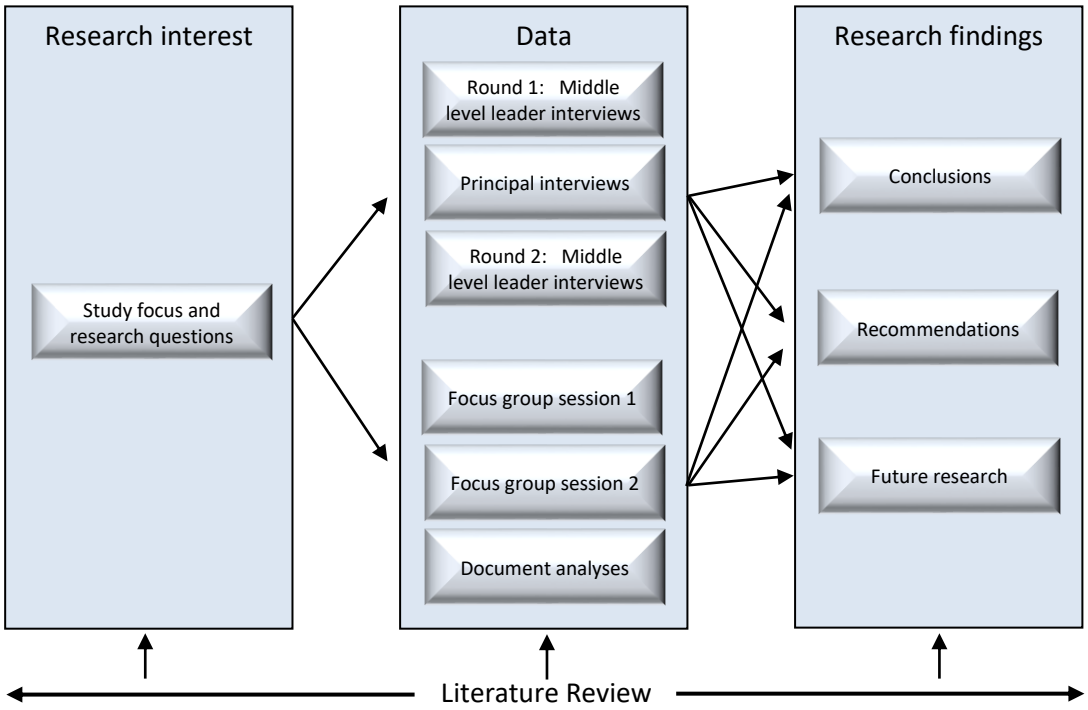

Figure 3.1 *Chain of Evidence*

The next section provides the rationale for the data collection used in the study, as well as describing effective ways (in a multiple case study methodology) in which the central focus and research questions were examined. Chapter Four details the processes in action in the study.

3.2.5 Research methods.

The three main data collection methods employed in this research study were:

1. semi-structured, in-depth interviews with middle level leaders (two rounds, i.e., two separate occasions) and principals;
2. focus group (two sessions); and,
3. document analyses.

1. Interviews.

Interviews were conducted on two separate occasions with the eight middle level leader participants. In qualitative research and indeed in case study research, interviews represent one of the most common and effective ways of collecting data (Forsey, 2012; Kervin et al., 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Simons, 2009; Yin, 2009). They are effective in that they produce a large amount of data in a relatively short amount of time (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In this study they offered the opportunity to learn more about the lived experience of the middle level leaders as they undertook their roles. They also offered some exploration of the context (school) within which each middle level leader worked, reflecting Stake's (1995) argument that contexts are important to note in case study research.

The two interview rounds with middle level leaders were separated by a six to nine month period in order for transcripts to be completed and initial data analysis to be conducted. The latter process allowed for important focussed identification of issues for the following second round of interviews. In between these two rounds of interviews with middle level leaders, the six principals of the eight participants were also interviewed.

The interviews were "in-depth" (Yin, 2009) in that they allowed sufficient time to examine issues of interest as thoroughly as possible with participants. They were semi-structured (Coleman, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2016) in nature, with guiding, open-ended questions asked of each participant in the first round, allowing for clarifying questions and probing for further information as suggested by Coleman (2012) and Creswell (2008). The interview

questions from the first round paralleled those asked of their principals in order to obtain another perspective on the expectations of the role. They were also used to elicit data for the fourth research question concerning the alignment (or otherwise) of expectations between principals and those holding the role. The second round of interviews with middle level leaders consisted of guided themes as conversation starters in order to probe emerging themes that had been revealed from the initial analysis of the first round interviews. Copies of the interview protocols and questions can be found in appendices C, D1, D2, F, G, H and I.

The interviewer was the researcher in each case. The researcher was mindful to take note of the advice of Babbie (2011) in allowing the interviewee to do most of the talking by engaging in a conversational style with the participants. The researcher also was cognisant of the need to find a suitable, quiet place for the interviews and to take notes in addition to the audio recording (Creswell, 2008), noting body language and other non-verbal cues (Coleman, 2012). All interviews, with the permission of participants, were audio recorded thereby ensuring that the words that were reported in the findings were accurate (Simons, 2009).

During the interviews and subsequent analysis, the researcher endeavoured to avoid making assumptions and used the focus group interviews in particular to test out different perspectives with new groups of middle level leaders. In this way, as Yin (2009) suggests, arriving at premature conclusions was avoided and new ideas allowed to emerge.

2. Focus groups.

Focus groups offer a number of advantages including: testing out themes that have already emerged in the data; accessing greater numbers of people in a short amount of time; allowing for a natural environment for discussion; and, putting people in a situation where they may be more comfortable than in a one-to-one interview situation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Two separate focus groups with middle level leaders were convened to further develop and test out themes emerging from the interview data and to provide potentially new perspectives on the research questions. Focus groups consisted of middle level leaders who were not involved as participants in the interviews. The choice to conduct the focus groups with new interviewees allowed for new voices to be heard, with middle level leaders from a variety of school contexts coming together to discuss issues to do with their role. Importantly, some cautions were heeded in the conduct of the focus group sessions so that no one voice was allowed to dominate (Babbie, 2011; Coleman, 2012; Simons, 2009) with the skill of the interviewer being an important factor (Babbie, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

The focus groups added to the data previously collected by way of the middle level leader interviews. They provided the opportunity for discussion of the issues and themes that had arisen (Robinson, 2012) from the participant and principal interviews in a potentially more relaxed environment than individual interviews might offer (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Using a focus group dynamic for these two groups offered a different kind of opportunity for middle level leaders to engage in dialogue with the researcher about their

roles. It also offered the opportunity to triangulate the data already collected from the eight participants.

There are differences of opinion about the optimum size of focus groups, with some suggesting that typically 7 to 10 people (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) is a good number, while others such as Creswell (2008) suggest four to six people. Babbie (2011) though, states that anywhere from 5 to 15 people is usual. The two focus group sessions that were conducted in this research consisted of nine people in the first group and five people in the second; both consistent with the recommended sizes cited in the literature.

The researcher took advantage of the dynamics of the focus groups where the interaction of members to an extent, guides the direction of the discussion (Babbie, 2011; Coleman, 2012). The researcher posed a number of themes for discussion and steered the focus group sessions carefully so that the discussion did not get side tracked. Appendix F provides the focus group interview protocol that was employed with the themes for discussion accompanied by the questions posed by the researcher during the conduct of the sessions. The researcher followed the advice of Robinson (2012) to make the focus group environment as comfortable as possible for participants with refreshments provided as the middle level leaders came to the venue following a day of teaching. Each focus group session was held in a private room at a school that was easily accessible and central to participants' place of work. For some participants, this was the school in which they worked.

3. Document analyses.

A series of document analyses of key materials gathered during the study provided the opportunity for secondary data (Vignoles & Dex, 2012) to be collected and to be triangulated against the interviews and focus groups. These analyses provided an additional backdrop and context against which to interpret and analyse the interview data (Fitzgerald, 2012) and ensured that multiple sources of evidence were used. The use of documents as an additional data source is widely reported in the literature, particularly in qualitative research (Fitzgerald, 2012; Kervin et al., 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Simons, 2009; Stake, 1995), supplementing that of the interview data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Simons (2009) suggests that documents can "enrich the context and contribute to an analysis of issues" (p. 63), with Fitzgerald (2012) advising that document analysis must take place in the context of other forms of data. Similarly, Yin (2009) asserts that in case studies, documents are important to use in corroborating and adding to evidence that has been gathered from other sources.

Yin (2009) further cautions that, while documents may well be readily available, they may not always be accurate and they also may not lack bias. He also states that documents can be difficult to access at times. Fitzgerald (2012) concurs, suggesting that documents can be subjective; requiring interpretation and analysis to draw conclusions about what is presented. While documents may be presented as fact, they can also be incorrect and therefore "must be carefully used" (Yin, 2009, p. 103).

In addition to these three main methods, the use of a critical friend (Briggs, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2016) was employed from time to time to check for understanding, to test out assumptions and to provide critical feedback on the research as it developed. Bassey (2012) suggests the use of a critical friend as a valuable strategy in judging the reasonableness of any assumptions or conclusions drawn. The critical friend is a very experienced middle level leader and was not involved as a participant in either the interviews or focus group sessions. In this way the critical friend was able to provide a “fresh pair of ears and eyes” for the research. Questions were sometimes posed to the critical friend about the role of middle level leaders and how the responses of participants in the study resonated or otherwise with his experiences. University supervisors were also regularly consulted and similarly acted in a critical friend role. In working with a middle level leader as an outsider to the research itself and in consulting with university supervisors, the research was more likely to be plausible and logical as well as being open and transparent and accessible to others (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

3.3 Data Analysis

Simons (2009) sees data analysis as referring to “those procedures – like coding, categorizing concept mapping, theme generation – which enable you to organize and make sense of the data in order to produce findings and an overall understanding of the case” (p. 117). The starting point for the data analysis employed Marshall and Rossman’s (2016) notions and involved a revisiting of the research questions posed at the outset and then deeper consideration of them in light of what the literature review revealed.

Importantly, analysis of the data was not suspended until all the data were collected however. During the period of transcribing the interviews, which were all deliberately completed by the researcher in order to become intimately familiar with the voice of the interviewees, data collection and data analysis naturally overlapped and interacted as ideas and issues emerged. Preliminary ideas, thoughts and notes were made during and after transcribing the interviews. According to Huberman and Miles (2002), this is a natural and advantageous feature of qualitative case study research.

The literature served ultimately to provide another form of data. Using an iterative process of data analysis was found to work well as the data were revisited. They were added to with subsequent interviews and the collection of documents. Data categories, and different tables and databases were created. This is consistent with Creswell's (2008) suggestion of revisiting the data many times, thus developing deeper understandings as the researcher moves back and forth between data collection and analysis.

3.3.1 Coding the data.

Audio recordings were made for all interviews, which were then fully transcribed and returned to the interviewees for checking for correctness. Amendments were invited to enhance clarity and accuracy. These data were then read and re-read several times to allow for immersion (Kervin et al., 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2016) of the researcher, prior to categorising and coding.

After some consideration the decision was taken to code the data manually and allow the opportunity to look across the full set of data for key themes, similarities and differences. Both Creswell (2008) and Yin (2009) suggest that manual analysis of the data can be advantageous when researchers want to be close to the data and develop codes gradually. After transcribing all of the interviews personally, the researcher felt comfortable categorising and coding the data by creating data word tables and labelling them according to themes, interview type and issue. The data were initially categorised by interview, focus group and documents. Dividing the data by source is a technique advised by Huberman and Miles (2002) to facilitate the identification of potential unique insights. In so doing, Huberman and Miles (2002) report that when patterns are then found from one source to another, the finding is stronger as a result. Subsequently, categories and themes emerged. Then, the three distinct sets of data were combined to provide cross-fertilisation. The process of gathering data, developing codes, searching for new information in the data and refining the codes into different categories or themes was an iterative process. Notes were made when dividing the text into codes, with the codes eventually revealing themes via the “constant comparison” technique (Creswell, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2016), involving constantly comparing the codes that were assigned to the various data sources, thereby allowing for the themes to emerge.

Lower level themes were distilled over time to reveal key themes as data reduction took place. Collapsing the themes into over-arching themes and sub-sets of information brought the data into “manageable chunks” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 217). As the key themes emerged, they were refined

and in some cases re-named. Simons (2009) advocates this method as a way to code, categorise and engage with large amounts of data.

Following the advice of Yin (2009) and Stake (1995), the researcher was also careful to capture the lone or dissenting voices to be faithful to the participants' stories and to the integrity of the research itself. In a similar way, Marshall and Rossman (2006) advise that the researcher needs to not only search for alternative understandings, but also to report them. In this study, the researcher was careful to take heed of this advice in interrogating the data for challenging or negative instances where patterns did not confirm or conform to the themes or issues identified earlier.

To account for possible researcher bias, the researcher provided preliminary interpretive findings to the participants to check for accuracy. This "member-checking" (Kervin et al., 2006; Stake, 1995) was essential in securing confidence that the researcher's interpretations were indeed consistent with the participants' thoughts and ideas. The participants were invited to offer alternatives in the language to sharpen the focus and the accuracy of their input. Creswell (2008) suggests checking with participants about different aspects of the study including the use of themes, the accuracy of description and the representative nature or otherwise of interpretations. Some participants in the study chose to provide additional data following the interview sessions, while others provided some clarity or re-wording of the initial transcript. These amended data were then used in the analysis. In addition, the use of a critical friend was another form of member checking that was used whereby aspects of the study were presented for comment

and feedback to check for understanding as the findings were being developed and clarified. Further refinement of the coding occurred with interpretations tested against the literature to allow for new, alternate and possible contradictory understandings to be revealed (Creswell, 2008).

Creswell (2008) offers advice on conducting data analysis in a multiple case study, suggesting analysis of each case separately and then conducting a cross-case analysis in order to reveal themes that are both similar and different. This involved treating each individual case as a unique set of data and then adding further cases progressively for analysis. Aggregation of the findings from the cross-case analysis was possible through engaging with "word tables" (Yin, 2009, p. 134). These word tables according to Yin are complementary tables that extend beyond the individual cases. Although they are first treated separately, they are then displayed in terms of features, categories and themes to explore the instances where the same type of information has been revealed. The advantage of this type of analysis was that it allowed for the production of subgroups or categories to reveal particular insights of interest to the study (Yin, 2009). Using the word tables allowed the themes from each individual case to be marked directly onto the transcript and then correlated with the other cases in simple tables. Quotes from each case illustrating these themes were then identified.

Data sets from the focus groups and document analyses were examined against the themes that had emerged from the participant interviews and principal interviews. The themes were then tested against what the literature

revealed. Individual cases were combined to provide a further case, which was the “combined case.”

3.3.2 Triangulation.

Triangulation of data was achieved by ensuring there were multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009). Principal interviews and document analyses were used to support and test the data gathered through the middle level leader interviews and focus groups. This allowed for a “coherent analysis of the data” (Kervin et al., 2006, p. 87) and for a number of different perspectives to be examined (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Triangulation was one more method that was used to ensure that a multi-pronged approach was taken to allow for other possibilities for interpretation with the research and the subsequent data collected (Stake, 1995). Kervin et al. (2006) offer three different ways in which the data may be triangulated in order to promote trustworthiness. These are described in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3

Methods of Triangulating Data According to Kervin et al. (2006, p. 87)

Triangulation method	In this research study
Data triangulation	Using different sources for the data: interviews (participants and principals), focus groups, document analysis.
Investigator triangulation	Data shared with the participants for member checking, also shared with supervisors and critical friend on a regular basis.
Theory triangulation	Comparing and contrasting different perspectives from the data.

3.4 Ethical Issues

In accord with the requirements of the University's ethics standards, and in concert with the advice of Kervin et al. (2006), participants were invited to be involved in the study on a purely voluntary basis. They signed an informed consent form prior to participation in the study and had the opportunity to withdraw from the research study at any time. Appendix B provides a sample of the letter of invitation. Participants were assured that every effort would be taken to maintain confidentiality of their identity, though this could not be absolutely guaranteed, particularly in the focus groups where several middle level leaders were gathered simultaneously. The efforts to maintain confidentiality were orally reiterated at the commencement of each interview. Names and other identifiers were altered, with pseudonyms used to promote anonymity.

The fact that people's own contexts and stories were under discussion required the interviews to be conducted sensitively and with due respect. The researcher remained cognisant of the fact that participation in the study was a form of intrusion into people's lives and to a degree, a disruption to their day (Babbie, 2011), making sensitivity to their individual situations very important. The researcher was also aware of the possibility that participants would be divulging personal and perhaps even intimate information about their own professional journey and to an extent, that of their colleagues in their own work context. The words of Creswell (2008) were continually revisited in order to consciously engage in respectful dialogue and communication with volunteers: "Participants give a great deal when they

choose to participate in qualitative research projects, often revealing intimate details and experiences of their lives" (p. 239).

Permission to conduct the study was sought via an approach to the Director of Schools in the diocese that was selected for the research. Subsequently, a letter of introduction and permission was issued to secondary schools within the diocese. Individual middle level leaders were then approached by letter. Follow up was made in person once volunteers were identified. An ethics proposal was submitted to the required authorities (the System education provider as well as the University of Tasmania Ethics Committee) for approval prior to the study commencing. The study was identified as a low risk study by the University of Tasmania. Approval was forthcoming from the diocese and the university.

While the data collected may be re-identifiable, they were not provided to third parties and were not used for employment-linked appraisal or the like. These points were clearly made to participants. There was no reimbursement or payment offered to participants. All interviews took place in the participants' schools, to promote comfort and personal ease, and to add weight to the nature of the 'context' for the case study inquiry.

All collected data have been stored securely on an external hard drive. It will be retained by the researcher for the duration of the doctoral study in accord with the requirements of the university and will thereafter be destroyed. The diocesan school system will not have access to the raw data or to the re-identifiable codes.

3.5 Ensuring Research Quality

Consistent with earlier discussions, and in order to ensure that the research conducted was of a high standard and represented quality in the field of case study research, the work of both Yin (2009) and Lincoln and Guba (2000, as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2006) was consulted to provide alternative yet complementary checking mechanisms against which the research could be tested.

Yin (2009) suggests four methods of examination of the research to ensure that it is high quality. Firstly, it is suggested that the analysis should attend to all of the evidence in an exhaustive fashion. This means a thorough analysis of the initial and follow up interviews with the participants and their principals, the focus group sessions and careful examination of all of the available documentation.

Secondly, Yin (2009) argues that the research must account for all major rival interpretations, thereby necessitating a rigorous checking of all interpretations against other possibilities, together with member-checking of all interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations. As previously mentioned, member-checking is a common tool that is used in qualitative research and is recommended by Kervin et al. (2006), Marshall and Rossman (2016), and Stake (1995).

Thirdly, the analysis must address the most significant issues. Again, the issues arising out of the data, the coding and themes generated were checked to ensure that they did indeed reflect the views of the participants as

well as the use of a critical friend. Finally, Yin (2009) suggests that researchers must employ their own expert prior knowledge. The literature review undertaken, together with the researcher's own professional engagement in the field of education for the past 29 years have been used to enhance and inform the research undertaken.

Lincoln and Guba (2000, as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2006) have produced seminal work, which provide four historic questions for qualitative researchers to ask themselves to ensure quality and soundness. These four questions have been shaped into alternative constructs for qualitative researchers to employ to ensure high quality work. They are: credibility; transferability; dependability; and, confirmability. The four constructs have been used in relation to this study to test for its "soundness" as proposed by Marshall and Rossman (2006). Firstly, for the research to have **credibility**, it requires that it has been conducted in a manner that adequately identifies and describes the subject. Middle level leaders have been both the subjects interviewed and reported on, as well as the subject under discussion as a collective: the role; the evolution of the role; the expectations of those holding the role; and, those who supervise the role.

Secondly, **transferability** requires the researcher to argue that the findings will be of use to others in the field. The design of this research and its presentation is such that the case study reports as well as the cross case analysis, together with the use of personal voice give a rich description of the lived experiences of middle level leaders. It is expected that these descriptions and the analysis of the cases provide those in the field of

education with research that is worthy of further investigation as well as informing current and future practice. Recommendations have been provided at the end of this dissertation regarding the future of the role. However, it is necessary to be cautious about any wider generalisability of the findings (Creswell, 2008). As Stake (1995) has argued, it is up to other readers of the research to judge if the findings "optimize readers' opportunity to learn" (p. 42): learning that is relevant to their particular interests and contexts.

Thirdly, **dependability** accounts for changes to the design that are brought about by a refined and shifting understanding of the setting. As the research was conducted, the understanding of individual cases deepened and refinements to earlier (tentative) conclusions were made along the way. The second round of interviews provided the opportunity to further explore themes and issues about the role of middle level leaders that were revealed in the first round interviews and also from the interviews with principals. Further, the use of focus groups offered a unique opportunity to discuss the role with two new groups of middle level leaders. Finally, **confirmability** accounts for the notion of objectivity: whether the findings of the study make sense to someone else. Confirmability has been tested through member-checking and through regular contact with university supervisors.

3.6 Limitations

All qualitative research—indeed all research—has some limitations. These limitations are primarily concerned with the subjectivity of qualitative inquiry (Stake, 1995). As such, the research concentrated on the guiding principles of case study research, with a desire to understand the case, and to discover

the unique features as well as the commonalities found in the cases (Stake, 1995). In so doing, the researcher has attempted to paint a picture that represents a slice of the life of middle level leaders in one regional NSW Catholic diocesan school system as they carry out their professional roles in schools. The research has attempted to give voice to the stories of these eight middle level leaders: empathically, richly described and in the context of people's lives. As noted by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), "certainty is not a goal" (p. 4).

As noted above, generalisability is another limitation that often characterises qualitative research and in particular, case study research (Stake, 1995). Case study research therefore attempts to aim for particularisation, where understanding is refined rather than generated and where the emphasis lies squarely on understanding the case in a rich or deep way. In further examining this issue, Stake goes on to suggest that the opportunity for the reader to learn is of prime importance. This experiential learning is termed "naturalistic generalization" (p. 42). Kervin et al. (2006) concur that the lack of ability of case study research to provide generalisation is a key criticism of the approach. However, as suggested by Creswell (2008), the research can make some generalisable claims from one case to the other. By using a multiple case study approach, the opportunity exists to engage in cross-case analysis to arrive at some assumptions or conclusions from one case to the next, though, as cautioned by Creswell, these generalisations may "make only modest claims in this direction" (p. 490).

Guarding against bias is another potential limitation of qualitative research. Case study research represents a particular concern with respect to the potential for bias to interfere with the study (Yin, 2009). To be aware of the potential for bias to have an impact on the study, the researcher has followed Babbie's advice (2011) in consulting with colleagues to sort out personal potential bias and in avoiding making judgements about individual cases in a descriptive or hasty manner. Rather, the attempt has been made to use comparative descriptions to arrive at some tentative conclusions. The use of a multiple case study has made this possible. Further detail about insider research and the potential for bias is explored in Chapter Four.

3.7 Overview of the Research Design

The following table (Table 3.4) provides an overview of the research design.

Table 3.4

Research Design and Data Gathering Overview

RESEARCH PURPOSE: Understanding the role of the middle level leader in New South Wales Catholic secondary schools

What?	Research process	Data gathering	Summary focus for data collection & analyses	Participants	Timeline
		Literature review			Jan 2012 – Aug 2016
Study Focus: An exploration of the role of middle level leaders in NSW Catholic secondary schools. Research Questions: 1. What do middle level leaders do in their role? 2. How do the articulated role descriptions (written and verbal) of middle level leaders match with the lived experience of their role? 3. How has the role of middle level leaders evolved over time? 4. In what ways do the expectations of principals align with those holding the role? 5. What, if anything, is the unfulfilled potential evident in the role of middle level leaders?	Epistemology: Social constructionism Theoretical perspective: Interpretivism (phenomenology) Methodology: Multiple case study Methods: • Interview • Focus group • Document study	Participant semi-structured in-depth interviews round 1	Letters to principals seeking permission to conduct research in their school	8 middle level leaders (including 1 pilot interview)	Jul 2013
			Letters of invitation to middle level leaders to participate		Aug 2013
			Discussion of role, expectations, evolution, whole school matters, preparation for the role		Sep 2013 – Dec 2013
		Principal semi-structured in-depth interviews	Discussion re role, expectations & alignment of expectations, evolution of role whole school matters, preparation for the role	6 principals	Feb 2014 – Mar 2014
		Participant semi structured in-depth interviews round 2	Discussion according to broad themes of: contribution to Catholic schooling, preparation for the role, expectations & key aspects of the role, leading the learning & pedagogical practice of the faculty, autonomy & authority	8 middle level leaders	Jun 2014 – Aug 2014
		Focus group interviews	Discussion re leadership, classroom practice & influence of middle level leaders, professional learning	Focus Group 1: 9 participants	Nov 2014
				Focus Group 2: 5 participants	Dec 2014
		Document analyses	Examination of: - position advertisements for middle level leaders - role descriptions - faculty meeting minutes - middle leadership team minutes	Researcher	Dec 2014 – May 2015

3.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided the justification for the choice of the research methodology that has been employed and referred in part to how the study was conducted. These latter matters are explored a little further in the next chapter. This research methodology subscribes to an interpretivist approach situated within a social constructionist epistemology. It uses multiple case study as the vehicle to collect rich data to enable a thick description (Stake, 1995) of the role of middle level leaders in Catholic secondary schools. Eight middle level leaders participated in in-depth interviews on two occasions, their principals participating in one in-depth interview, and two focus group sessions of middle level leaders were also conducted. Documents were analysed to add to the data pool.

Steps were taken to ensure research quality. These included engaging with the work of Yin (2009) to promote validity and reliability, as well as Lincoln and Guba (2000, as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2006) to ensure research quality and soundness. The limitations of case study research have been acknowledged as have the steps taken to mitigate these. An overview of the research design and data gathering has been provided to summarise the development of this work. The approaches to analysing the data were also described. The next chapter situates the theoretical underpinnings of the research in the context of the choice of cases selected for this study and details the research in action. It also examines the role of the researcher as an insider and addresses issues of potential positional power imbalance and bias.

Chapter Four

Research Design

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides elaboration on some important aspects of the research design as discussed in Chapter Three including the context for the study, the selection and characteristics of participants and how the researcher managed his role as an “insider”.

4.2 Selection of Research Site and Participants for the Multiple Case Study

This study took place in one regional Catholic school diocese in NSW, Australia. The researcher is an employee in this diocese. As such, schools in the diocese were well known to him and afforded relatively easy access as research sites. Stake (1995) recommends selecting cases on the basis that they “are easy to get to and are hospitable to our inquiry” (p. 4). Practically speaking, the issue of access was addressed by conducting the research in an environment that was familiar, where the governing bodies were known and where relationships had already been developed and where trust and credibility had been established. Marshall and Rossman (2006) suggest that choosing a “realistic site” is desirable. Yet a further inducement for using a familiar group in a familiar setting that resonated strongly with the researcher was the appeal of “being drawn to study my own kind” (Kanuha, 2000, as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 106). The diocese in which the researcher was employed was large enough to allow for a variety of

participants' experiences and personal attributes and variable school settings.

The diocese currently has 11 schools with a secondary school component. Some schools are located in a large regional city, while others are in regional or rural areas. There are different school types including Years 7-12, junior high schools (Years 7-10), senior colleges (Years 11 and 12) and one Kindergarten to Year 12 school. All schools are coeducational. School sizes range from approximately 500 students to nearly 1,100 students.

Principals of all the secondary schools in the diocese were approached via a letter of request (see Appendix A) to conduct the study in their school. Of the 11 schools, 10 indicated their willingness to be involved and for the researcher to make approaches to their middle level leaders. Letters of invitation were then sent to middle level leaders (see Appendix B) in each of these 10 schools. Of the 102 letters that were sent, 26 middle level leaders indicated their willingness to be involved in the study either as participants directly in the individual interviews or as members of focus groups.

4.2.1 Selection of middle level leader participants.

According to Stake (1995), selecting participants for case study research should not be about attempting to choose a sample that is "typical or representative of other cases" (p. 4). Rather, it should be about selecting cases that provide the opportunity to learn. In selecting a "sample," the researcher was faced with possibilities of choosing random sampling, purposive sampling or theoretical sampling (Simons, 2009). The most

appropriate form of sampling to use in case study research according to Simons, is purposive sampling. Consistent with the arguments of Stake (1995), Simons (2009) asserts that purposive sampling in case study design promotes the aim of gaining insight and developing understanding. Purposive sampling is also favoured when there are a small number of cases and where the expert judgment of the researcher is employed (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). It is for this reason that purposive sampling was used in selecting the participants as 'cases' to be interviewed in this study.

There were a number of criteria for selection of the final set of participants for in-depth interviewing. These included the individuals' expressed desire to be involved in the study, the permission of their principals being granted and for the corresponding principals to also have signalled their interest in participating in the study. The principals would serve as data sources as well as being interviewed. Of prime importance, however, heeding the advice of Stake (1995), the researcher selected participants who were seen to offer the opportunity to maximise what could be learnt. Creswell (2008) supports this notion in suggesting that selection of participants should be inclusive of those who can best assist in furthering the understanding of the research focus. Yin (2009) suggests also making enquiries of people who have some knowledge about each potential candidate prior to using them for the case study. Such people may include peer colleagues in the school, line managers of the middle level leaders (assistant principals and principals) and staff who are engaged with the school from a diocesan office perspective. A sufficient number of middle level leaders enthusiastically expressed their interest informally in being involved in the study. The researcher knew many of these

middle level leaders, given his position in the diocese. This knowledge provided some confirmatory support for inclusion of those indicating their willingness to be involved. Further details on the characteristics of the participants are provided below. As previously noted, efforts were taken to promote and maintain the confidentiality of participants. These were reiterated verbally and in writing, with pseudonyms used to strive for anonymity.

In attempting to provide “balance and variety” (Stake, 1995, p. 6) with respect to the study participants selected, the researcher applied some additional criteria such as seeking equal numbers of males and females, those who were middle level leaders in different faculty groups, those from a variety of geographical areas and school types, and those with a variety of length of experience in the role of middle level leader. The participants in the study came from one K-12 college, one senior Years 11-12 college, three junior secondary Years 7-10 high schools and one rural Years 7-12 high school. Overall, the participants selected to be involved were all keen to participate and were easily accessible as well as being potentially able to provide a depth of information (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Initially, six middle level leaders were to be selected to participate in the study with one additional middle level leader included to conduct a pilot interview. The pilot interview was undertaken to test out the interview process and questions (Stake, 1995). It also served to rehearse the researcher’s interview style prior to conducting the field interviews proper. The middle level leader chosen was easy to access and amenable to being used for the

pilot. Following the interview he was invited to comment critically on the conduct of the interview and the quality and sequencing of interview questions, and to offer feedback on the process, including an opportunity to amend and respond to a transcript of the interview. The quality of the data collected from this pilot interview was judged to be important enough to be included in the full study. A further participant was subsequently added to provide gender balance and to ensure that a variety of faculty types was included. Eight middle level leaders were selected in total to be the final interviewees and comprised the 'cases' for the study. Those not selected for in-depth interviews were subsequently invited to participate in focus group sessions.

The schools from which the participants came were in a mix of city, regional and rural areas, spread over approximately a 160 kilometre distance. The four male and four female participants had a range of experience in the role spanning from 6 years to 20 years. Two participants fell in the 31-40 years age group, three participants were in the 41-50 years age group and three participants were in the 51-60 years age group. Each participant led a different KLA or faculty group. These were: Learning Support; Science; Mathematics; Human Society and its Environment; English; Creative and Performing Arts; Religion; and Personal Development, Health and Physical Education. Table 4.1 summarises the characteristics of the participants in the study.

Table 4.1

Middle Level Leader Participants

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age group	Faculty responsible for leading	Experience in the role of middle level leader	School type and location	School size
Carl	M	51-60	Special Education	20 years	Junior High School, city	601-900
Mark	M	41-50	Science	11 years	K-12 school, regional	901-1200
Eve	F	41-50	Mathematics	8 years	7-12 High School, rural	601-900
Tracey	F	51-60	Human Society & its Environment (HSIE)	17 years	K-12 school, regional	901-1200
Kathryn	F	51-60	English	15 years	Junior High School, regional	901-1200
Mary-Jane	F	31-40	Creative & Performing Arts	6 years	7-12 High School, rural	601-900
Nigel	M	41-50	Religious Education (RE)	7 years	Senior College, regional	601-900
Justin	M	31-40	Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE)	18 years	Junior High School, city	901-1200

As noted in Chapter Three, middle level leader participants engaged in two rounds of in-depth, semi-structured interviews held some months apart. Interview duration was approximately 60 minutes in each case. The interviews were held in the participants' home school at a time that was convenient to them. A raft of questions was used in the first round of interviews to guide the discussion and the second round consisted of themes

as conversation starters to guide the discussion. The themes for the second round of middle leader interviews were drawn from the key issues that emerged from the first round of interviews as well as those from the principal interviews. Both interview protocols can be found in Appendix G and Appendix I.

4.2.2 Principals.

There were six principals in the study—five male and one female. They represented the principals of the schools of the eight participants in the study. In granting their permission to approach middle level leaders in their school prinicpals also agreed to participate in the study themselves.

The principals had been in their substantive positions ranging from five years to 26 years with the average length of experience being 12.5 years. There was one principal in the 31-40 years age group, three principals in the 51-60 years age group and two principals in the 61+ age group. Principals in the study participated in one semi-structured in-depth interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. One interview was significantly shorter at 20 minutes in duration. Interviews were held in the principal's school at a time and on a date that was convenient to them. All interviews took place in the principal's office.

Interviews were designed to add another dimension and set of perspectives to the data gathered from the middle level leader participants, and to also determine from principals their expectations of middle level leaders. The

interview schedule for principals can be found in Appendix H. The characteristics of the six principals are summarised in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

Principal Participants

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age group	Experience in the role of principal	School type and location	School size
Hamish	M	31-40	6 years	Junior High School, regional	901-1200
Bill	M	51-60	9 years	Junior High School, city	901-1200
Adam	M	51-60	10 years	Junior High School, city	601-900
Anne	F	61+	13 years	Senior College, regional	601-900
Steven	M	51-60	26 years	K-12 school, regional	901-1200
Frank	M	61+	14 years	7-12 High School, rural	601-900

4.2.3 Focus groups.

Two middle level leader focus groups were conducted to further explore and triangulate the data gathered from earlier interviews with the eight middle level leaders and their principals. The focus groups allowed for an additional 14 middle level leaders from the schools in the same diocesan Catholic school system as those who were participants in the study to share their experiences of the role, generate new data as relevant and to provide critical commentary on the emerging findings from the study. Invitations were sent to a number of middle level leaders who had earlier offered to be involved in the study, but who were not selected to be interviewed, to attend at two central locations close to the home school of those who had volunteered.

The focus group sessions took place after school hours in November and December of 2014. All 14 middle level leaders who signalled their willingness to join in the focus group sessions on the advertised dates participated in the sessions. As with the participant interviews, each focus group was audio recorded with the transcriptions then completed by the researcher. Drafts of the transcripts were provided to each focus group member for comment and amendment. Field notes were taken during the focus groups, noting body language and other non-verbal cues.

Nine middle level leaders (two males and seven females) comprised the first focus group and five middle level leaders (two males and three females) the second focus group. Each focus group was approximately 60 minutes in duration. Focus groups were facilitated by the researcher who has considerable experience in conducting and facilitating workshops and group interviews. These skills were important because, as Babbie (2011) has noted, conducting focus groups requires a particularly skilled facilitator to ensure that the group dynamic is controlled and each member has an opportunity to make a contribution. Individuals who are overly-talkative need to be gently encouraged to let others speak.

A set of open-ended questions and themes were used as starting points for discussion. The focus groups provided valuable additional as well as confirmatory data of tentative themes identified earlier as well as clarification of a number of issues. A copy of the focus group interview schedule can be found in Appendix F. Table 4.3 provides a snapshot of the focus group members.

Table 4.3

Focus Group Participants

Focus group number	Number of participants	Gender composition	Faculty groups represented
1	9	2 male 7 female	Technology & Applied Studies (TAS), HSIE, Science, Special Education, English
2	5	2 male 3 female	HSIE, TAS, CAPA

4.3 Data Collection Strategies

The theoretical underpinnings of the data collection strategies were discussed in Chapter Three. As noted earlier, three main sources of data were collected: 1. interviews; 2. focus group sessions; and, 3. document study. The interviews with principals followed a very similar question format as those used in the first round of middle level leader interviews, with the important addition of seeking principals' views as to their expectations of middle level leaders. As a result of feedback from participants from the first round of interviews, the second round interview guidelines were provided to participants prior to the interviews taking place. This allowed the participants the opportunity to reflect on issues to be raised prior to the actual interview.

Documents relating to the role of middle level leaders were requested at each round of interviews with both the middle level leaders and principals, as well as during the focus group sessions. Examples of documentation collated and analysed included meeting minutes, role descriptions, staff handbooks, position advertisements, criteria for roles and any other documents that might provide information about the role of a middle level leader. In some cases,

reminder emails were sent to principals and the eight middle level leaders to provide documents relevant to the research questions wherever possible. Documents were analysed in a similar fashion to the other data, i.e., they were coded and categorised with emerging themes noted and then combined with the emerging themes from the interviews. These themes were then collapsed into broader, over-arching themes.

4.4 The Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research the researcher plays an important and pivotal role (Simons, 2009). Creswell (2008) advises that the researcher must be aware of their role in the study and should honour and respect those who participate in it. In this study, the researcher was a senior leader in the school system with issues of insider knowledge, possible bias, and the potential for power imbalance needing to be managed carefully. From a positive viewpoint, the researcher was well known to most participants and therefore had already established a rapport and a relationship with them (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

The researcher's main role was to be a good listener as well as to be flexible and adaptive in the conduct of the interviews (Yin, 2009). Honesty and transparency were also important regarding the actions taken, and the reasons why they were taken, to ensure that researcher reflexivity (Creswell, 2008; Simons, 2009) was practised. This required the researcher to critically reflect on the research as it progressed and to guard against the possibility for bias, in terms of the questions asked at interview, as well as during data analysis.

4.4.1 Insider research.

It can be problematic when research is conducted in one's own environment and one in which the researcher in this case holds a leadership role in the school system (Busher & James, 2012). It is possible that some middle level leaders and principals themselves may have felt some pressure to be involved in the research project. The potential for pressure to be involved was attended to in several ways. All written material explicitly stated that this was a research project conducted in conjunction with a university study and not as a leader in the education system. Potential participants were reassured in writing and verbally on each occasion that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and that they could exercise their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Prior to each interview, the researcher reinforced the capacity in which he came to the interview—as a doctoral student and not as an educational leader in the school system. Efforts to maintain participant confidentiality were also reiterated in writing and verbally. As noted earlier, ethical approval was granted from both the University and the diocesan school system to conduct this research as an 'insider'.

4.4.2 Potential for positional power to influence outcomes.

It is necessary to acknowledge that the positional power of the researcher as a senior leader in the school system used for the study had potential to unduly influence middle level leaders to participate in the study and to also possibly influence the information they divulged as part of the interview process. Despite written and verbal reassurance that the researcher was acting in the role of university student undertaking research and not in his capacity as an employee in the diocese, the substantive leadership role of

the researcher may still have influenced people's decisions to participate and indeed to be cautious about what they revealed during the interview process. While all participants appeared comfortable and willing to engage intimately in the process, the researcher remained conscious that his formal leadership role could possibly compromise some participants' responses. Various strategies employed by the researcher to minimise such challenges have been noted earlier with some reiterated in the next section.

4.4.3 Managing bias.

As already noted, qualitative researchers must be aware of potential bias arising as they conduct their studies. In using interviewing as the major form of data collection, Bush (2012) argues that bias is unavoidable, particularly when conducting semi-structured interviews. The advice of Kervin et al. (2006) was followed in attempting to manage bias and personal values by ensuring that a) any biases were acknowledged, b) a variety of data through multiple sources was used, c) analysis was shared with participants, d) findings were shared with colleagues to find out different perspectives, and e) any contradictory findings were sought out and reported (p. 145). This advice was followed carefully with sharing and engagement of the data with the researcher's critical friend and thesis supervisors providing additional processes to challenge the voracity of the findings.

4.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has considered the research design in action by describing the methods employed for the collection of data through three main sources: interviews with middle level leader participants and principals; focus group

sessions; and document study. The chapter has described how the participants were chosen, the data collection strategies employed and the ways in which the researcher, as an insider, managed and acknowledged potential for bias and positional power to influence the study. The next chapter (Chapter Five) presents the findings from the research.

Chapter Five

Findings from Middle Level Leaders

—Interviews and Focus Groups

5.1 Introduction

The following two chapters present the findings for the study. They report the data in a descriptive manner, with Chapters Seven and Eight being devoted to a synthesis of the data and drawing out the key messages from the research. Chapter Five deals specifically with the responses obtained from the middle level leader participants interviewed in the study, as well as those who participated in the focus groups. Chapter Six presents the findings from principals and from the document analyses.

As a reminder of the guiding framework for the study, this research study sought to provide a contemporary picture of middle level leadership as it is practised in NSW Catholic secondary schools and was guided by the central focus:

> An exploration of the role of middle level leaders in New South Wales Catholic secondary schools.

This central research focus was supported by five research questions:

1. What do middle level leaders do in their role?
2. How do the articulated role descriptions (written and verbal) of middle level leaders match with the lived experience of their role?
3. How has the role of middle level leaders evolved over time?

4. In what ways do the expectations of principals align with those holding the role?
5. What, if anything, is the unfulfilled potential evident in the role of middle level leaders?

Chapters Five and Six use the same structural framework as that employed in the literature review, being based closely on the research questions posed in Chapter One. This structure is illustrated in Table 5.1. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of the findings from across the interviews and focus groups.

Table 5.1

Relationship of Chapter Five to the Research Questions

Chapter 5	Research question
Middle level leader participants	
The role in action	Question 1
Role description versus lived experience	Question 2
Evolution of and changes to the role	Question 3
Expectations of middle level leaders	Question 4
Possibilities for unfulfilled potential	Question 5
Focus group participants	
The role in action	Question 1
Role description versus lived experience	Question 2
Evolution of and changes to the role	Question 3
Expectations of middle level leaders	Question 4
Possibilities for unfulfilled potential	Question 5
Synthesis and summary of findings from all middle level leaders	Questions 1-5

Selected quotes (presented in italics) are used throughout to authentically capture the voices of participants (middle level leaders and focus group members) and to illustrate key points being made. Pseudonyms are used to

protect anonymity, with care being taken to preserve the context of the schools in which the middle level leaders and principals worked. Throughout the chapter, summary tables are included to provide the reader with easy reference to the main emerging findings.

5.2 Participants

5.2.1 The role in action.

Role complexity.

When asked how they saw their role, participants overwhelmingly talked about the complexity of the role, with some labelling it a 'multi-faceted' one. Most participants commented on the linking or connecting role that they played in communicating with both senior leaders and faculty members to ensure that information was relayed from one group to the other and, importantly, so that the voice of the staff was heard:

> *I see the role as contributing to the overall leadership in the school, providing a link between faculty level and the executive of the school.* (Justin)

Another dimension to this linking or conduit role was to implement the vision of the leadership team once decisions were made and to impart those decisions to the staff:

> *I see my role as supporting the executive of the school, not necessarily having to agree with every decision that's made but being aware of the fact that once that decision is made that we're part of the*

team and the team has to carry out that decision and making sure that that happens and perhaps selling it I suppose to the staff if need be. (Eve)

Interestingly, middle level leaders saw themselves as contributing to discussions regarding the strategic direction of the school, while acknowledging that the conception of the vision itself was largely the responsibility and province of the senior leadership team. While this linking or conduit role was important in "binding" the classroom teachers to the senior leaders, it was also seen as a difficult position for the middle level leaders to hold, as they referred to the role as being "caught in the middle" or the "meat in the sandwich" between the two groups. The middle level leaders acted as brokers in many cases and often viewed themselves as the agents that bound these important groups (senior leaders and teachers) together:

It's the connecting role between senior management and the class teachers and quite often sadly there's a bit of a disconnect between senior management who get caught up in other things and the practicalities of what's actually happening at classroom level. Middle management plays a significant role in that connection. (Carl)

When middle level leaders felt themselves caught in the middle, they commented on feeling torn between their loyalties to their faculty staff, who are their day-to-day colleagues and team members, and their responsibility to the senior leaders. Nigel commented on this dilemma:

Being the meat in the sandwich [is what I find least rewarding]. I think middle leader managers have a really tough job sometimes when the voices at the top and the voices at the bottom are not aligned: that they have to communicate both messages and they have to communicate sometimes messages that are in conflict and they can be misrepresented at both ends of the scale.

Eve expressed the same difficulty:

It's not called middle management for no reason. I am the meat in the sandwich I suppose.

Table 5.2 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.2

Linking and/or Conduit Role

- Middle level leaders play an important linking, connecting or conduit role with senior leaders.
- This sometimes results in them feeling like the "meat in the sandwich" as their loyalties are divided between senior leadership and classroom teachers.

Not surprisingly, all middle level leaders nominated some aspect of the curriculum as being an important part of their role. They typically saw their role as leading the implementation of the curriculum in their school in line with Board of Studies, Teaching and Education Standards (BOSTES) state legislated requirements and ensuring compliance with local diocesan and government expectations. In addition, their job was identified as supporting teachers in their work and variously described as the leadership of teaching

and learning, guiding pedagogy or improving learning. How this manifested itself in practice was not always clearly expressed. Indicative of these aspects of the role, Justin expressed:

> *I'm in charge of staffing and budgeting in terms of my faculty, in charge of the programming, curriculum, in charge of monitoring staff, making sure registers and all the necessary paperwork is completed, resourcing, purchasing equipment and consulting on the need for. I see it as a role model for the other staff and probably a facilitator.*

What constituted the curriculum and their role in the delivery of it was broadly expressed by middle level leaders. It was seen to be inclusive of teaching programs, registers, rosters, assessment programs, examination setting and checking, and so on. All participants readily articulated a detailed list of these responsibilities and accountabilities throughout the interviews. One aspect of curriculum given high prominence by the middle level leaders was oversight of its implementation by checking and attending to required documentation. They were all very familiar with this dimension of their role and clearly saw it as a key element, although it typically involved dealing with a large amount of paperwork which, for many, was almost totally consuming of their time. Without exception, every middle level leader nominated paperwork as something that dominated the role and their time, as indicated by these comments:

> *A lot of paperwork is the thing that always jumps out. I spend a lot of time doing paperwork. It is a big part of the role.* (Mary-Jane)

There is a bulk of paperwork and you do drown in the administrivia. I can't see a way around that because Board of Studies requirements mean that you have to have that paperwork. It can be very, very difficult to do much else when you are faced with those expectations. So you are locked in in many ways. (Tracey)

While the administrative aspects of the role were accepted by the middle level leaders as being necessary, they were seen to take time away from other activities that they said that they would prefer to be doing. Nigel lamented this fact:

The management is encroaching on the leadership. Every minute I have to do paperwork is a minute less that I get to talk to my staff. If I could just pull a few items off the table I would invest that time back with my staff because that's where I know I get my best return on investment.

Table 5.3 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.3

Managers and Administrators

- The role includes responsibility for the implementation of the curriculum, with administrative tasks taking up much of the available time.
- The role appears to be centred on management tasks at times.

Preparation and training for the role.

Most of the middle level leaders indicated that very little preparation was provided for them prior to taking up the role. Where preparation or training was provided, it had taken place in another diocese or school system other than the Catholic diocese in which they now worked. However, most cited on-the-job learning as the main way in which they gained skills. For some, this was via securing acting positions prior to being appointed to a permanent role. Learning how to carry out the role effectively, as well as learning what not to do as a middle level leader were skills that came from observing their predecessor in the role or from other middle level leaders in their school. This was Eve's experience:

> *The biggest preparation I had for the role was just my dissatisfaction and frustration with my coordinator that was above me, and that's perhaps good preparation. I didn't have any preparation for that whatsoever. I feel like I've fumbled my way though it most of my life.*

The preparation for the role appeared to be ad hoc in most instances and, where some leadership training was provided after appointment, it consisted of generic leadership courses. Some spoke of a "sink or swim" approach to their appointment to the position:

> *It was sink or swim actually. I didn't have really anybody to help me.* (Mary-Jane)

The induction process was almost non-existent. To say I was thrown in at the deep end would be a very apt description. Very few people were able to give me any support and guidance about what needed to happen. I had to foster my own contacts and my own relationships. (Nigel)

You go into the role but there's no training, there's no background. A lot of the management positions are a bit like that; it's like, well done, you've been promoted, you've won this position. And, you know, good luck! (Justin)

There was strong support for the need to better prepare future leaders to middle leadership positions, with several mentioning the potential of succession planning. Three participants were very frank in their description of how some middle level leaders, including themselves, won their position: either by default or because they were the only applicant. Aspects of the training and preparation that middle level leaders would like to see occur prior to taking up the role, overlapped with the need for ongoing professional development and professional learning once in the role. Participants were quite detailed about these learning needs. This is discussed later in the chapter.

Professional development.

Middle level leaders provided varied responses about the quality and amount of professional development and professional learning they had engaged in, once appointed to the role. Four of the eight participants mentioned their

post-graduate degree study at Masters level as being important in their professional learning. While system-level network meetings were found to be relevant and useful, other more recent professional learning opportunities that had been provided such as co-coaching and mentoring found favour among participants. The frequency and quality of professional learning that had been offered at diocesan level had improved in recent years, yet some participants still called for a more uniform diocesan approach to professional learning for the role. There was little overall agreement on the preferred models of, and content for, professional learning opportunities.

Professional development that was identified as being valuable for their role included staff management issues, communication and conversation skills, use of data to improve learning, dealing with difficult and underperforming staff, learning support, resilience, and general human relationships issues. Requests for practical leadership training in how to carry out the role were illustrative of the need for further development prior to appointment. It was acknowledged that some of these types of courses were now being offered at system level for new and existing middle level leaders. Table 5.4 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.4

Preparation, Training and Professional Development

- Few middle level leaders have received any preparation or training prior to taking up the role with some feeling that they had secured the role by default or because they were the only applicant.
- Postgraduate study at Masters degree level, as well as coaching and mentoring, were seen as valuable professional development.
- Further professional development in dealing with difficult and underperforming staff was desired as well as some generic leadership skills.

Leading in a Catholic context.

In the first round of interviews the significant emphasis that middle level leaders placed on the Catholic nature of their leadership was noteworthy. They readily acknowledged the importance of the context in which they worked and how they had a responsibility as leaders to promote and uphold the Catholic ethos of the school. This included being a role model for others, setting an example with staff and students, and employing a pastoral concern for all in the school. In addition, involvement in the liturgical life of the school and playing their part in ensuring that the Catholic identity of the school was lived out in an authentic way was seen as important. The personal and professional behaviour of middle level leaders was also something that participants were aware of and felt the need to ensure was in harmony with the espoused ethos of the school. Tracey commented:

> *I guess there are personal expectations as well. Certain standards of behaviour, work ethic, what I do and say, obviously where I do and*

say that, involvement in the community in school life, in things like liturgies and so forth, that comes back to our faith dimension.

Regardless of whether the middle level leaders were in fact Catholic, they spoke of the values-laden nature of their role. Carl summed this up succinctly:

You need to have those strong Christian and Catholic values. That's very important in middle management.

However, one participant, Kathryn, was less sure about what it means to lead in a Catholic context in the current climate. Although she did nominate the faith aspect of her work as important to her in a personal sense, she was unsure of what it means to be "Catholic" today. Nonetheless, she was happy to act as a role model in terms of leading prayer and contributing to the liturgical life of the school in a very visible way. Kathryn went on to say that she was proud to work in a Catholic school but that there was confusion in the Church's message in a changing world. Notwithstanding this uncertainty, Kathryn articulated the pastoral role she plays in caring for others:

I think as a leader my first job is to look after those people in their life, not to use a judgement.

All participants spoke strongly about the ways in which their leadership was infused with a Catholic element and that faith had a central role to play in how they interacted with, and treated those with whom they worked: staff,

students and community members. However, Carl expressed some concern about the level of conversation and training that people received to take up their role as a leader in a Catholic context:

> *There's not many conversations that go on about establishing our identity, about common ideas that we should all share about why we choose to teach in a Catholic school. I think there's a bit of a void there to tell the truth.*

Table 5.5 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.5

Leading in a Catholic Context

• Middle level leaders readily acknowledged their responsibilities in modelling behaviours and values consistent with those of the Catholic Church.

Building and leading a team.

Middle level leaders identified building and leading a team as vital to their role. This aspect included getting to know and supporting staff in a personal as well as professional sense, encouraging, motivating and affirming staff as well as developing their expertise in the classroom. Participants spoke of the collegial nature of their teams and the rewards of working with teachers. At times this posed the potential for conflict as middle level leaders juggled their dual roles of being a co-worker with these colleague teachers, and simultaneously, their line manager. However, the overall emphasis with the participants in the study lay primarily on group decision-making and supporting and enhancing the team. Middle level leaders noted building trust

and respect among the team as important, with trust having to be earned. Mary-Jane saw herself as a “guide” as opposed to a “boss”:

> *I don’t like that word boss. I like to see myself as a leader. I don’t see my role as a Coordinator to being a boss. I like to see it as guiding and allowing my staff to come up with new ideas and pedagogy.*

Group consensus was high on Tracey’s priority list when it came to her team:

> *The one area where I do try and push: we’re a team, this is not my decision, this is our decision. And to that end, I often don’t make decisions about things that I could make on my own. I’ll say no, let’s do this together.*

Four participants in particular provided high praise about the quality of their team and how that enhanced the work of being a middle level leader. Having a high quality team encouraged these middle level leaders to work hard for their faculty members and in turn, to encourage others to lead.

> *I’ve got a great team and I delegate whatever I can delegate to people to give them the opportunity to see through things.* (Carl)

> *My teachers make me work hard. They are all amazing. I have to be as amazing as them and I love that. They’re all extraordinary.* (Kathryn)

In a similar vein, Eve made the distinction between leading and managing because of the strength of the team that she leads, with the rationale being that leadership ultimately took care of itself due to the nature of the team and as a result, her work was essentially managerial in nature:

> *I spend a lot of time managing. That's just the nature of the beast. I think the leadership happens without you even realising it sometimes that it's happening. The leadership from me is making sure that we get time to sit down together to have those conversations and that I listen to them and then they listen to me. The leadership is minimal I think because I have such a great faculty.*

The middle level leaders all noted their role as weighted heavily towards management. One participant, Nigel, suggested that much of what middle level leaders did could very well be completed by administration staff. Mark also agreed that the role was still seen by others very much as a managerial one and that the work is viewed as being that of a "box ticker." Table 5.6 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.6

Leading and Managing a Team

• Leading and managing a team is an important skill. • The role appears to be weighted towards management rather than leadership.

Colleague middle level leaders.

As well as building and leading a team of their own (e.g., the teachers in their particular curriculum areas), middle level leaders also belong to another team of colleague middle level leaders, variously called the middle leadership team, studies team, curriculum management team and so on. The contributions that the middle level leaders made to this team were seen as important at a broader school level. The support and collegiality they derived from their peers was also deemed to be important. Belonging to a middle leadership team provided an avenue for the middle level leaders to have their voice heard and to share insights with each other.

Some middle level leaders were critical of some of their colleagues, expressing a depth of feeling about how some often let the team down. Also noted was the wide variety of skill levels and commitment held by some of their colleagues, with negative criticism of the quality of some others being quite evident in the interviews. The lack of contribution made to the team and a frustration with the perceived staid nature of the team was noted by some. The following comments illustrate:

> *Many of my colleagues seem to be stuck where they are. They've found that very comfortable place to be and I'm disappointed sometimes that they don't challenge themselves more and certainly don't influence their teachers more.* (Carl)

> *Some contribute more than others; there'll be some people that say very little and some that have a lot to say.* (Mark)

There are members on the Studies team that if I were starting my own school I wouldn't be employing them. (Justin)

But yes, when you have a team of people, some of whom are keen to learn and do different, some of whom will tell you the answer to everything about what we should do is what we used to do; that's a difficulty. (Kathryn)

There are clear implications here for principals: what expectations they hold of their middle level leaders and how they, in turn, lead this group. Some went so far as to suggest that they had witnessed and experienced some poor treatment either of themselves or a peer middle level leader by other middle level leaders because they had attempted to do something different or to initiate change:

She is treated poorly by her colleagues for what she does and what she does is what ideally we'd like all of our middle managers to be doing which is setting high expectations, working hard and having no compromises about quality learning and quality education and I think I'm starting to be lumped into the same category because I have a similar philosophy. (Nigel)

I walked in and I was told . . . don't bother to come in here and tell us that you know more than we do and you're going to tell us what to do

and for the rest of the year my presence was actually a detriment.

(Kathryn)

Table 5.7 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.7

Colleague Middle Level Leaders

- Middle level leaders belong to a group of colleague middle level leaders. Sometimes the quality of peers and the contribution that they make to this group is questioned by some colleague middle level leaders.

Skills and qualities of middle level leaders.

The middle level leaders were able to clearly articulate the professional and personal qualities they believed were required of a successful middle level leader. Central to these were relationships—building and sustaining effective and positive relationships both within the faculty team and across the school were seen as being critical to the role.

Relationships are hugely important and until you build relationships change won't happen. (Nigel)

Flowing from this, qualities identified included trust, respect, being a good listener, offering advice, affirming and supporting staff, being a good communicator, facilitator, hard worker and being organised. Importantly, the middle level leaders themselves noted that it was important that they too were recognised and affirmed for the work that they did. Some noted constructive feedback on their performance would be welcome, something

not readily evident in their school. One participant said that the job was a lonely one with few accolades afforded.

Rewards in the role.

While there were several areas in which middle level leaders suggested their role could be improved and enhanced, all interviewees identified a number of rewards in their role, particularly those concerning relationship building. These included: enjoying working with students, staff and parents and the satisfaction gained from assisting students with their learning; and assisting staff with their teaching, programming and assessment planning as well as in their professional growth. Middle level leaders felt rewarded when their work was appreciated and recognised by senior leaders in particular. Carl captured this well:

> *I think I'm the luckiest guy in the diocese working in this school with a management team that absolutely recognise the good work that we do and the support that we give the staff and students and they treat with very high esteem—the role—and myself.*

Justin's rewards came from making a valued contribution to the middle leadership team and the accompanying appreciation that came with that:

> *The respect that comes with the position, being able to feel like I'm making a difference, contributing and making suggestions at Studies level and feeling appreciated that my ideas are well thought through and student centred.*

The successes and rewards of the position appeared to mainly derive from the relationships that were forged and reinforced through the quality work that was done. Table 5.8 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.8

Skills, Qualities and Rewards

- The skills and qualities required of middle level leaders include personal qualities, communication skills, organisational skills and most importantly, the ability to build and sustain relationships.
- While the role in action contains many difficulties and constraints, it is also extremely rewarding, with relationships, trust, and feeling like one is making a difference in the lives of students, being aspects of these rewards.

5.2.2 Role description versus lived experience.

Role authority and autonomy.

It emerged from the data analysis that most middle level leaders felt that they had a sound level of autonomy in their role and that this carried with it a degree of authority. A major contributing factor of this authority was that it was predicated on trust: earning and gaining the trust of senior leaders. For example, Mark felt trusted in his capacity as a middle level leader:

> *I've never had a supervisor that didn't trust me or I've never worked anywhere where I felt I wasn't trusted.*

Kathryn likewise felt trusted in her role, and thus enjoyed autonomy, perhaps more so than what some of her colleagues in other schools might enjoy:

> *I think I have more autonomy as a leader in this school than some of my colleague Coordinators do in other schools. I'd like to think it's because my bosses trust me to do my job.*

Justin also identified the trust that his leaders had in him:

> *I think I do have a lot of trust and autonomy. I think there's very little that I would ask for that I would be stonewalled with.*

Two others, however, felt that they did not have much autonomy to make decisions and that they were micromanaged in their work. Interestingly, both of these participants came from the same school, possibly reflecting a particular context or cultural characteristic of this school.

> *I feel I'm dictated to as to what your meeting will be or what the agenda will be so I suppose I have a bit of an issue with what I'm entrusted to do.* (Eve)

> *I sometimes feel it's a little bit micromanaged on behalf of the principal here that I'm not able to fully give all of myself and what I'm capable of doing. I sometimes feel there's a certain point I can go to and then it stops.* (Mary-Jane)

Autonomy, authority and decision-making power were all related to individual school contexts. Another middle level leader, Justin, indicated that although

he felt he had a high level of autonomy, the role had little positional power to make decisions. In the end, someone else would always check and make the final decision. Consequently, he felt there was little capacity to make substantial change at either faculty or whole-school level.

Tracey, an experienced middle level leader, said that her experience with different principals had taught her that it depended on “how many runs on the board” one had. As to how she felt respected and the degree of autonomy and authority she enjoyed, depended on “who is at the top”. Importantly, the influence and expectations of individual principals emerged as an important finding in mediating the degree to which middle level leaders felt that they had trust, autonomy, authority and decision-making power in their roles.

Limitations in the role.

Every participant in the study mentioned time as a crucial and constraining factor in their work. Each of the middle level leaders held 0.2 (of a full-time teaching load) non-teaching time for their middle level leader responsibilities, amounting to approximately four hours per week. Some referred to the increases in the amount of work they had to do, particularly with regard to compliance, paperwork, the collection and analysis of data, work samples, and the completion of documentation such as risk assessments and excursion forms. Such tasks impacted negatively on the time they then had available to work with their teachers and developing new pedagogical approaches. The general consensus seemed to be that the role description and subsequent workload had expanded in recent times, but the time allocation had not. Three participants noted the increasing amount of work

they now did at home in the evening, on weekends and in holiday time. Eve neatly summed up the issue of time:

> *There's just no time to sit back and talk to them and find out how their problems are going. There's just no time. We are so pushed for time it's ridiculous. I feel like I work six days a week as it is now just to get the work done that I've got to do.*

There was a call for more administrative support in the form of additional clerical assistance to provide more time for them to do their job. They felt that a lot of the paperwork, data entry and administration they did could easily be handed over to an administration person, thereby leaving them more time to engage in promoting quality teaching and learning. Table 5.9 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.9

Autonomy, Trust and Limitations

- Generally, participants felt that they had a good sense of autonomy in their role, but little (major) decision-making power. This autonomy and authority was predicated on trust and depended on senior leaders in the school.
- Time was frequently cited as being in short supply and insufficient to do the role. Middle level leaders felt constant time pressures in the role.
- Additional clerical assistance could free up time to engage more deeply in matters pertaining to teaching and learning.

Contributions to the wider community.

Middle level leaders were asked to comment on what roles they played beyond the school itself. There was very little evidence of activity at regional, diocesan or state level with activities confined to Higher School Certificate (HSC) marking, participating in the diocesan Secondary KLA Network meetings and membership of various teacher associations such as the English Teachers Association. Three participants who were members of regional or rural schools spoke more of the importance of their role in the community in terms of being an example and a role model at all times, participating in school and Church functions and being visible at community events. The nature of living in a country town and being in a leadership position was something they were very conscious of in their work and in their personal lives. There was little evidence of any personal or professional expectation that middle level leaders would make a contribution to the broader educational agenda in the region, city or state. Table 5.10 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.10

Role in the Community

- Middle level leaders in rural/regional areas were more keenly aware of the role they played in community events and the contributions they made in the wider community.
- Few middle level leaders engaged in educational roles beyond the school itself.

Pastoral middle level leaders.

In the system of schools used for the study, those charged with leading the curriculum at the middle leadership level in their capacity as faculty heads or coordinators (sometimes termed KLA or studies coordinators), enjoyed the same leadership capacity and status as those charged with leading pastoral or year level middle leadership (sometimes called year coordinators or student coordinators). An unexpected finding of this study was the strong view curriculum middle level leaders held regarding the profile and status of their position compared with that of the pastoral leaders. There was a strong sense that those in pastoral care roles were much more valued than those who led curriculum. Justin made two comments in this regard:

> *I'd probably like to see there be a more equal balance between the studies/student team in terms of their standing.*

> *There seems to be a hierarchy of P and APs then the student team ahead of the studies team.*

Similarly, Kathryn took some pains to carefully explain the importance of pastoral care, but also emphasised the fundamental role of teaching. In speaking of the tensions between the pastoral and the curriculum leadership roles she said:

> *Very different roles. And that's a nerve for me. That makes me sad. They're the real coordinators. There is no doubt that what our school should do is care for people but I think the reason we care for people*

is so that they can learn well and I'm not sure that that's clear in what I see of our system. They are children, they should be cared for, none of that is questioned but our purpose is in giving them a good education.

Kathryn further explained the power differential between the two groups:

I think they're also different and I think they're more powerful in the school and that's not because I want more power it's just because I think that skews the way we do things a bit.

Having had the experience of holding both curriculum and pastoral roles, Nigel also noted some differences between them:

I think that the time that I spent as a student coordinator was very important in that you were much more visible I think than a studies coordinator is in a school and you had that daily contact with individual students and weekly contact with the cohort of students that you were responsible for.

He also noted some additional tensions across the two middle leader groups:

Sometimes [there is] hostile animosity between studies and student coordinators. I find that hilarious because to me it is simply a fact that they are very, very similar workloads depending on how we cope.

Table 5.11 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.11

Pastoral Middle Level Leaders

• Pastoral or Year Level middle level leaders appeared to enjoy greater status and visibility compared with the curriculum middle level leaders in the study with some apparent competition and animosity between the groups.

5.2.3 Evolution of and changes to the role.

Middle level leaders were asked whether they felt the role had evolved or changed over time and, if so, how. There was considerable variation in the views that were expressed around this issue. Most participants agreed that the role had changed and would continue to do so. As noted earlier, the biggest influences of change were the expectations of those in the role to do more than previously, resulting in increased workload and time pressures. Additionally, information technology was changing the way the work was carried out, both administratively and pedagogically. The role has grown, according to the majority of participants. Mark noted how technology had shifted his role from a centralised one to a more distributive, collegial one:

> *It was very much a centralised role in terms of information and my role was really to be the hub and then to feed out information to people who needed it. Now I'm as likely to be learning things from my colleagues because of technology.*

In addition, participants noted the expectation to mentor new staff had changed their role. Pressure to improve student results in the public domain

(e.g., both national testing and HSC), the influence and growth of special education (and the numbers of students diagnosed with learning disabilities) also impacted on the nature of their work. The role was now seen as much more legalistic, with middle level leaders feeling highly accountable for their work. Simply put, the volume of information they were expected to deal with continued to grow, as did the paperwork. One participant suggested that the role was now a lot more stressful than it used to be.

Notably, some of the interviewees had a different view and suggested that in fact their role had not changed and that some of the middle level leaders themselves were the ones who resisted change in the school, either passively or actively, and who worked against embracing new ways of conceiving of their work and of pedagogical practice. Both Carl and Nigel were frank in their assessment of how their colleagues resisted change:

> *We've been trying to change things here for quite some time in terms of pedagogy but it's stuck in middle management who don't understand these new concepts.* (Carl)

> *The staid nature of the staff here: the conversation 'that's not how we do things here' is one of the most repeated phrases I've come across in any school. It's almost become the charism of the school.* (Nigel)

This study found that role descriptions and expectations had remained fairly static for a long time. Justin felt that the role description for a middle level leader had not changed for a long time and that the expectations have

remained fairly static. Nigel agreed with the sentiment but added that he thought it would change markedly in five years time.

Pedagogical practice and change.

An important aspect of change for middle level leaders flows from ongoing developments in pedagogical practices. Pedagogy was variously described by participants as requiring significant dialogue (formal and informal) with staff about all aspects of teaching and learning, and encouraging collaboration and sharing of ideas. However, almost exclusively, middle level leaders believed they had little impact, if any, on actual classroom practice. What did occur was somewhat superficially limited to discussion and the sharing of resources and ideas. When asked about team teaching and lesson observations involving critical feedback to teachers, the middle level leaders indicated they were reluctant to enter classrooms to observe their faculty colleagues teach. Most did not do this at all. The reasons for the lack of classroom observation included a lack of time, timetable restrictions, reluctance to observe experienced colleagues, the perceived threatening nature of formally observing another teacher in action, and the feeling that it would be seen by teachers as supervisory rather than collegial.

Hence, while the middle level leaders acknowledged the potential value and importance of lesson observation and other supportive strategies for teacher development, few actually engaged in them. As a result, such activities were more rhetoric rather than actual practice. Those who did engage in team teaching or lesson observation indicated they did so somewhat surreptitiously or with an ulterior motive. For some, the only time they actually engaged in

direct lesson observation was either with inexperienced, beginning teachers or with those who had been identified as underperforming. The culture of shared classroom practice was not well established in any of the schools of the participants in the study. Nigel spoke of his experience:

> *I'm very invested in a conversation about what we want to do in our classrooms, what we want to achieve as our end goals. Where the job description has a clear set of criteria or descriptions about being responsible for a community of learners and you know, developing pedagogy and professional development and the like, I think a reality is that a lot of those things don't necessarily occur in these roles.*

Mary-Jane described why it was difficult to organise lesson observation at her school:

> *We were actually going to watch each other's lessons but the process of finding that time and then letting the Deputy know we'll need that time out so we can observe each other and then for her to then maybe have to put a casual on to replace.*

Justin outlined the team teaching approach that was often taken in his school with respect to some practical lessons. Sometimes classes would be combined for theory lessons. He was one of three participants who identified a team teaching initiative that had taken place within the faculty. However, the notion of lesson observation was still seen to exist only at the informal level:

There's a lot of observation and opportunities for me but it's not formalised sitting in, but I could do that. I could walk in to any of their classes at any time and they would be comfortable enough for me to be sitting up the back and not feeling like they're under pressure and being examined.

Kathryn alluded to the difficulties inherent in lesson observation of experienced teachers:

To tell an old teacher I'm just going to come to your class tomorrow and have a look, ok, would not be a good thing. But to tell the young teachers that, they don't even flinch; they almost expect it. And I need a process around to do that, for me because it's hard for the old teachers to have people come in, but it's hard for me as the old person to go in.

Table 5.12 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.12

Evolution of and Changes to the Role

- Most participants felt the role had changed and grown though there were some diverse opinions on the degree and how it had changed. More accountability and public scrutiny of results, IT, parent expectations and volume of paperwork were contributing factors. Most participants agreed that the workload had increased.
- There was general reluctance to change practice by engaging in lesson observation of classroom teachers and to engage in shared pedagogical practice.

Aspirations to further leadership roles.

Participants were invited to comment about their role in terms of how it both prepared them for, and generated the aspiration to, further leadership, such as either to assistant principal or principal level. Notably, there was a general lack of aspiration among the participants for promotion to the role of principal. Five participants specifically stated they did not aspire to the principal role. The role was not an attractive one for them, with some noting that they had observed principals in their role and simply did not want that to be their life. Other barriers identified included the legal accountabilities of the role, with one participant commenting about how different it was for a woman and a mother than it was for a man to hold a senior leadership position in a school:

> *As a mother I've made a decision that says ok that's the limit of where I will commit to school. I think men are able to walk away from that a little bit more than women. And I've made that call because I often see women who are in positions of leadership and they're really struggling.* (Tracey)

Issues of gender, general lack of aspiration through the modelling they had witnessed from other senior leaders as well as the growing expectations of senior leadership were all significant issues that were seen as detrimental to aspiring for further leadership. Despite the general lack of aspiration to more senior positions displayed by this group of middle level leaders, most agreed that their role should provide the necessary training and aspiration for further leadership. Some saw their current position far removed from senior

positions such that they felt unprepared for the role or that they really did not have a good understanding of what the principalship entailed:

> *But do I feel prepared for the role? No I don't, not at all. And I think what scares me more is the legal aspect of things. I don't know whether we prepare. I don't know who would aspire for this role to be quite honest. At this point, it's not me.* (Eve)

> *I don't even know what they do, so how do I know I'm being prepared. So I guess the answer is I don't know.* (Kathryn)

Mark spoke of what he saw as the daunting nature of stepping up into a new role:

> *Positions further up always look a bit scarier than they end up being, particularly with curriculum leadership where you're responsible for people who are experienced in areas that you're not.*

However, four middle level leaders, Mark, Kathryn, Nigel and Justin suggested that their roles should be a preparation for, and provide the aspiration, to further leadership. Mark provided an interesting view on leadership preparation at the middle leader level:

> *The best thing that comes out of being a middle manager in terms of preparation for leadership is the time to find out who you are. You need to spend some time marinating in the middle management role.*

Mary-Jane saw her role primarily as that of a teacher, reflecting the passion she had for working with the students. She believed the more senior the leadership position, the more removed one became from the classroom:

> *I've seen the stress recently on executive members and I think, my passion is, I love doing what I do, I love being in the classroom and I feel that being in that middle management role it's still allowing me to have that rapport with students and to still do the things I love doing and why I became a teacher. And so for me it's a win-win situation; still be in the classroom but still have that little bit of leadership role.*

Both Mark and Eve concurred and saw themselves predominantly as teachers. Eve noted:

> *I love teaching. I don't really want to be pulled out of the classroom any more than I currently am. It's what I decided I wanted to do.*

Just as the middle level leaders themselves nominated a responsibility to role model to their staff, the middle level leaders also looked to their superiors to provide the same modelling. Kathryn commented on what she felt she needed from her superiors in providing that modelling and aspiration:

> *I think we should all aspire, not necessarily in straight lines to promotion but we should aspire and then we should have people who make good decisions above us to do that next step. I think everybody*

should want to do something better but they need someone above them to make good judgements and maybe that's been the problem. I need two things from them [senior leaders]: I need a clear idea of where we're all going together so I know I'm confident to learn the steps and I need that articulated clearly and I need it articulated for more than just me so that I'm not seeing different people doing it differently and questioning myself.

In a similar vein, Nigel looked to his senior leaders to provide him with both a vision and reassurance about how the school was being led:

We want to know what their vision is. We want to know that they're a stable force within the structure of the school. And whether that's talking about how they deal with students or how they deal with staff or what their vision is for curriculum. That takes time.

Table 5.13 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.13

Aspirations to Further Leadership

- Few middle level leaders aspired to further leadership. What many saw senior leaders being responsible for was detrimental to them aspiring to senior roles.

5.2.4 Expectations of middle level leaders.

Alignment of expectations between middle level leaders and principals.

A key research interest of this study was to explore the alignment (or otherwise) of expectations about the role of middle level leaders among those holding such roles and their principals. The middle level leaders in this study thought their principals expected them to be loyal to their vision of the school, and to support and carry out the decisions taken by the executive, as well as making contributions to the middle level leader team. Further, middle level leaders believed principals also saw their responsibility for the implementation of the curriculum in the faculty area as a key part of the role. This responsibility was inclusive of meeting deadlines and expectations with respect to paperwork, administration and compliance, to be a good teacher, to be knowledgeable about the faculty and to support whole school initiatives and policies. Participants also spoke of their principal expecting them to support staff in their work. Justin pinpointed a number of role expectations from his principal:

> *Hard work and innovation, people management skills and also being supportive of those whole school policies and initiatives.*

Participants noted that principals expected them to act in accordance with the espoused ethos and values of a Catholic school:

> *That I am living a good Catholic life and that I'm able to be seen in Church activities outside of school.* (Mary-Jane)

The majority of middle level leaders believed there was a reasonable to very good alignment of expectations between those they held and those of their principals. Kathryn was confident that her principal's expectations were firmly aligned with her own:

> *We have frank conversations, pretty confident if we had disagreements over how I see and he sees my role I would know that. I think it is very strongly aligned to mine: that I am leading learning and in a way that's making it a positive thing for everybody.*

One participant said that they were "mostly aligned", but would have liked a greater appreciation on behalf of her principal of the difficult role that middle level leaders were sometimes placed in with "selling" decisions to staff:

> *I think he needs perhaps to have a greater appreciation that the decision sometimes is hard to sell. It's easy enough to make the decision; it's very difficult sometimes to sell it to the staff.* (Eve)

One participant thought that at times she wasn't able to exert real leadership because she was micromanaged by her principal. Interestingly, these latter two participants came from the same school. While one participant saw the alignment of expectations as being reasonably close, he qualified thus:

> *There is a reasonable alignment between her expectations and my expectations. In terms of the job, the role description and what it*

should be I think she expects far more than what the job description puts in front of us. (Nigel)

Overall, the middle level leaders pointed to a lack of clarity of expectations in the role. Tracey explained:

I'm not sure sometimes of the expectations and sometimes that causes quite a bit of discussion at studies meetings.

Nigel concurred and added that the expectations change depending on the individual middle level leaders who held the role:

Yes there are different expectations. Often the expectations though between the middle leaders are more about who's in the role than about the role as such.

At his school, Justin indicated that you were left alone to get on with doing the job unless there were complaints:

Most of the time you're left to run your own ship. There are certain obvious requirements that have to be met whether it's reporting, assessment items or submitting budgets. But other than that you're pretty much allowed freedom to head whatever direction you like and not until there starts to be parent complaints I think would there be any particular notice about what was happening in this faculty.

Colleague middle level leaders.

At times, participants were critical of some of their curriculum middle level leader colleagues, particularly of their performance and skill levels. The variability in skill level of middle level leaders was of concern to participants. Carl was especially critical of some of his colleagues:

> *I think mediocrity really sometimes is the standard. Many of my colleagues seem to be stuck where they are, they've found that very comfortable place to be and I'm disappointed sometimes that they don't challenge themselves more and certainly don't influence their teachers more.*

Justin also pointed to the differences in leadership quality:

> *There are people who are studies coordinators or student coordinators in our school and lots of schools who, you know, if I were starting my own school I wouldn't employ them as a studies coordinator or a student coordinator.*

Expectations that others had of middle level leaders.

In addition to discussing the principal's expectations, the general expectations of the role by other members of the school community, particularly classroom teachers, were examined. Middle level leaders viewed their faculty members' expectations largely around ensuring that administration was completed; that marks were entered, reports done,

paperwork finalised, Board of Studies entries were correct and so on. The role was seen as an administrative one. Mark noted:

> *I think if you ask most people who was the curriculum leader at this school they'd probably still look at an AP or the Principal. They still see us as the box tickers.*

Table 5.14 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.14

Alignment of Expectations of Principals and Colleague Middle Level Leaders

- Participants thought their principals expected them to implement the curriculum, support policies and initiatives, complete administrative tasks and assist with the implanting of their vision.
- In general, middle level leaders felt they had a good deal of alignment of expectations with their principal although better clarity of expectation was desired.
- Middle level leaders thought that those holding pastoral or year level positions were afforded greater kudos, recognition and power than curriculum middle level leaders.
- Participants suggested that there was a marked difference in quality of some middle level leaders.

Mentoring and networking*.*

Middle level leaders acknowledged that part of the expectation of their role was concerned with mentoring staff, especially beginning teachers. However, somewhat ironically, in terms of their own development and learning, there was a call for mentoring opportunities to be formalised and structured to provide frequent contact with a colleague leader. That is, they felt they were missing out in this regard.

Mentoring for new teachers is always considered to be a good process but mentoring for middle management's not considered and I think there's a place for that. Mentoring from people who've been in the role for quite some time for new people in the role could save a lot of angst and miscommunication. (Carl)

Those who had recently engaged in coaching and co-coaching professional development spoke positively about the experience and argued for a continuation in the development of these skills. Kathryn spoke of her own formation as a leader with an informal mentor:

I had an amazing person who I would say was the closest thing to a mentor who I could ask questions of so I think I was really lucky. I don't think there was any official sense of mentoring in that but I was aware she was there for me.

Those who were interested in seeking a mentor expressed a desire for this to be organised at system level for them and formally implemented. Interestingly, the reliance on the system to put mentoring in place was again indicative of a general sense of powerlessness and in some ways, represented a lack of self-initiative by the middle level leaders. Mark spoke of the need for this process to be facilitated thus:

I guess it needs to be set in some sort of framework. I think expectations about a mentoring process need to be identified and time

to get together with your mentor, a chance to have an ongoing professional conversation, have some time for that [and] you set maybe some sort of goals and action plans, come back after six months or so.

Nigel also provided some important insights into his mentoring experiences:

I've also had a really good run of mentors; official, unofficial, but people who have been very supportive and have given some wisdom around things. There have been some people who have been very important for showing me what they do and for myself to model that but also there've been plenty of individuals who have been very important for showing me what not to do and I think who I am as a leader is an amalgam of a lot of that.

Three participants felt the geographical isolation of their school worked against effective (face-to-face) networking and mentoring. Consequently, there was little networking on offer beyond the system organised network groups. Some mentioned the loneliness and isolation of the role. Carl lamented the fact that there was not more on offer in terms of networking between schools and again echoed the view that the system needed to provide this opportunity:

I think there needs to be more conversation between middle leaders from a systemic point of view. It seems to be left to the individual schools to develop their own processes and ideas.

Table 5.15 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.15

Mentoring and Networking

• Middle level leaders expected that they should provide mentoring to others, but also expressed a desire to receive system initiated mentoring and networking opportunities for themselves.

5.2.5 Possibilities for unfulfilled potential.

There was ample discussion throughout the interviews about exploring other opportunities to exert leadership. This was particularly evident when discussing trust and authority in the role, and how this was mediated by the principal and on occasion, the assistant principals. For example, some middle level leaders felt that their senior leaders were reluctant to let go of tasks and responsibilities for leadership, with a resultant flow-on effect to middle level leaders. Eve noted:

> *Sometimes it's very hard for that person [the principal] to let go of things.*

Mary-Jane similarly felt that she was not being used to her full potential:

> *I'm not able to fully give all of myself and what I'm capable of doing. I sometimes feel that there's a certain point I can go to and then it stops. Sometimes it's just a dead end. I suppose not giving me the opportunity to fail so I can learn from that really.*

In addition, Mary-Jane felt that at times she was not a leader, but rather "a puppet [of the principal]." Some middle level leaders felt somewhat stymied in their leadership, particularly with regard to pedagogical matters with their staff teams, again mostly at the hands of senior leaders, where their autonomy and authority to lead was constrained, rather than encouraged. Frustration was apparent for middle level leaders, as Justin expressed:

> *Being handicapped in some ways about the amount of change that you can make. Often important decisions are passed up the chain of command and sometimes you get frustrated with either inaction or decision(s) that you know, you can see a particular vision or direction but not necessarily having the power I suppose to actually help see that through.*

A few of the participants actually named control as an issue for some senior leaders:

> *Others [senior leaders] have issues around control and there's a totally different aspect of that because one thing is said yet another thing is practised.* (Tracey)

This notion of unfulfilled potential in the role came not only from senior leaders failing to distribute leadership or "allowing" others to lead, but also from colleague middle level leaders who exerted pressure upon them not to institute change, or indeed to initiate innovation in their own curriculum teams. Two middle level leaders, Kathryn and Nigel, had both experienced

situations where their own leadership was curtailed through negative comments from colleague middle level leaders, resulting in their “retreating” to a position of silence and lack of action.

Carl summed up his feelings about his potential to lead from the middle:

> *I’ve been selected to do this because of my potential to influence others. I think we’re sometimes just left to our own devices. But I think there’s potential there to do a lot more and ask a lot more of middle managers in terms of their own commitment to influencing good pedagogy within their departments.*

With a specific reference to the benefits of distributed leadership, Kathryn noted that leadership in schools was not limited to those with formally instituted role titles or positions:

> *I’m a firm believer in the whole distributed leadership concept and I don’t think aspiration to leadership has to mean titles. I think we have on our premises some really strong leaders who don’t want the title.*

Some middle level leaders commented on what their role could potentially involve in the future, if their skill-sets and time were more profitably utilised:

> *[I would like my role to involve] quality leadership, one that I can feel supported in and one that I’m able to make judgements that I feel*

would be, would play a crucial role for the development of the school.

(Mary-Jane)

We spend a lot of time firefighting issues and not anywhere near enough time being proactive. The rhetoric around what I'd like to be doing and the reality of what my minutes are spent on is widening.

(Nigel)

Table 5.16 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.16

Unfulfilled Potential in the Role

- Some middle level leaders felt they were not being used to their full potential, with senior leaders and, at times, colleague middle level leaders constraining them in their activities.
- Distributing leadership provided opportunities for middle level leaders as well as others, to lead.

5.3 Focus Groups

5.3.1 The role in action.

The middle level leader focus groups, comprising different leaders from those involved in the individual interviews, generally tended to validate (triangulated) the findings from the interviews as well as providing some insights into the role. Participants in the focus groups described the role as being that of a guide and mentor for staff, especially younger members of the faculty. It was one that builds a sense of teamwork within the group. The middle level leaders spoke about supporting staff, and setting a tone and

direction for the faculty that was marked by mutual respect. Key aspects included enthusing and motivating others, as well as ensuring equity and fairness, and transparency in decision-making. Promoting pastoral care, staff safety and maintaining faculty team harmony were also noted as concerns for middle level leaders. They saw their role clearly as one where trust needed to be built to set goals and build a sense of collaboration among teachers in their area of responsibility.

Participants viewed the role as one where the middle level leader acted as the spokesperson for their particular teaching group, representing a team of people and ensuring their voice was heard through the school's leadership and colleague middle leader teams. Focus group participants believed their leadership was exercised both within the faculty and across the school through working with senior leaders. The exercise of leadership was often seen as a delicate balancing act and was dependent on the relationship that was developed with the principal and assistant principals. They clearly saw their role as one in which they made a contribution to the whole school agenda and the vision and direction of the school. One participant said:

> *There just isn't one area of leadership but it's a bit of a balancing act in terms of being the leader of your faculty but also being a leader within what we call our leadership team where you've got to make decisions in lots of different areas.* (Carolyn)

Another participant described this delicate role as one that depended on the degree to which middle level leaders were supported by the school hierarchy

and one that was also influenced by the sense of team that existed among the middle level leaders themselves. Yet another participant spoke of the transfer role that middle level leaders played in communicating information from the senior leaders to classroom teachers. One middle level leader described this role in colourful language:

> *The principal may have such a vision, and principals should do that but then it's the middle managers that chew it and make it digestible.* (Damien)

In discussing what they did in the role, respondents identified an extensive range of tasks and responsibilities including: organisation; paperwork; administration; supporting staff with student discipline matters; taking care of programs; assessment documents; curriculum implementation; legal accountabilities; leading people in fulfilling their requirements as teachers; being a Catholic role model and spiritual guide; and being a contact point for staff and acting as a sounding board. Participants also saw relationships as a key part of the role, with trust and affirmation of staff central to this. Some spoke of the cultural aspects of the role where the building of a particular culture that was shared among middle level leaders was seen as being important. The notion of collaborative teams was part of this discussion.

Consistent with the eight middle level leader interviewees in the study, the focus group participants noted the impact of the large amount of paperwork and administration that is required in the role. Some participants raised the issue of how isolated one could feel in the role, with a stronger, supportive

network of connections among middle level leaders in schools being identified as desirable. All agreed that they needed to be seen (by the principal as well as by classroom teachers) as competent classroom teachers with a deep knowledge of the curriculum so they could serve as role models for others in teaching practice.

Rather than being seen as the “fount of all knowledge”, they preferred their role to be one of a facilitator. One participant found it difficult to be referred to as “boss” and rather saw herself as a colleague teacher in many ways. This echoed the feelings of some of the participants who preferred to be viewed as “equals” *with* teachers and not line managers *of* teachers. Leading by example and the notion of role modelling was again linked to this collegial view of the role. Table 5.17 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.17

Roles, Skills and Opportunities

- The role in action sees middle level leaders enthusing others, mentoring teachers, building a sense of team, being a spokesperson for the faculty and working with senior leaders to contribute to the school-wide agenda.
- Middle level leaders perform a communication and linking role between class teachers and senior leaders.
- The role requires middle level leaders to possess administrative skills, curriculum skills and skills in modelling Catholic values. At times, the role can be isolating.
- Opportunities for networking with other middle level leaders were desired.

Professional development.

Of the middle level leaders involved as focus group participants, three identified their formal study towards a Masters degree as being important in their ongoing professional development. More generally, there was broad acknowledgement among the focus group participants that middle level leaders had been offered, and had participated in, a good deal of professional development in recent years; but the time to implement the ideas gained from the professional development was lacking once they returned to school.

Middle level leaders identified a number of areas where they believed professional learning would significantly enhance their capacity to undertake the role. These included dealing with difficult or under-performing staff and the skills to engage in, what one participant described as, “courageous conversations” with parents and staff. They were keen to become better at managing people, especially in working with cynical, entrenched staff who had been in the same school for a long time. Barry noted this challenge thus:

> *There’s that intransient group that have been in the job for a lot of time but they’ve become cynical or seen it all before and they’re the ones that are the hardest to reach you know, and how do we do that? How do you reinvigorate older staff? And we’ve got a lot of older staff in our system.*

Table 5.18 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.18

Professional Development

- Postgraduate study was seen as valuable professional development.
- Professional development offerings in recent times had been useful and plentiful, however, the time to implement ideas and changes was lacking.
- Professional development in dealing with difficult or underperforming staff would be helpful.

5.3.2 Role description versus lived experience.

Role authority and autonomy.

In a similar vein to the eight participants interviewed in the study, focus group members spoke candidly about their concerns with the lack of positional power that they felt they had in their role to bring about change with staff. One participant saw the role as not "having any real power or strength", with the role being one where the middle level leader has to request things to be done rather than being able to expect that would be done. Antonio's comment illustrates this sentiment:

> *I don't think people have the concept of us having any real power or strength, like, you can ask people to do things, if they don't do it, there's not much more that you can do, whereas if you're a deputy or a principal I think you've got a little bit more, and that's fair enough, power to say, well you will do it or you'll give me a good reason why can't. We don't have that sort of power.*

As a result, if and when, problems did arise with staff not completing required tasks those in more senior roles often became involved.

Limitations in the role.

Again consistent with the data from interviewees, focus group participants argued that there was a lack of time for middle level leaders to carry out their broad range of responsibilities. With an 80% teaching load, middle level leaders believed there was little time available to do anything else other than to complete the paperwork and administrative aspects of the role. There was much discussion around the desire to engage in lesson observation and collaborative practice with colleagues. However, this was hampered by a lack of time.

Middle level leaders frequently completed most of their preparation for their own classes outside normal school hours. Interestingly, one participant spoke of not needing more time as such, but wanted the time allocated to be free from constant interruptions, particularly with having to prepare and cover lessons for absent colleagues. Similarly, the middle level leaders noted that their classroom teaching time was often interrupted by knocks at the door from staff and students. Rebecca's comment illustrates the tensions with time for middle level leaders and a frustration of not being able to engage in a wider range of activities with teachers:

> *I would like to lead more in academic excellence and rigour and while I might have the ideas I do not have the time to implement these ideas and share them because I'm bogged down with the day-to-day stuff.*

Comment was also made of the long hours committed to the role, with many middle level leaders being the last to leave the school each day and among the first to arrive each morning. One participant noted:

> *I think it's a major killer for anyone with a young family, I don't think you're going to get too many young people in because they will probably do what I did when I still had a tribe of kids at home and that's take it home and start working again at ten o'clock at night. But now I'm staying here till seven o'clock and you can just walk around this place and there'll be studies coordinators who are here.* (Vesna)

The hours worked, observed by teachers, was seen as a deterrent in terms of how attractive or appealing the role was to other staff who may want to consider middle level leadership. Participants questioned whether the dearth of applicants for vacancies when they occurred was in fact due to the workload and the lack of remuneration as well. Ray's comment captures these sentiments well:

> *I feel that others look at the role of a middle manager and say it's just not worth it. It's just not worth applying for that job considering you get a period off a day and a couple of extra dollars.*

Middle level leaders argued, like those interviewed, that they could "gain time" if they had more secretarial support, with additional administrative

assistants helping with data entry, record keeping, photocopying of work samples and the like. Table 5.19 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.19

Role Limitations

- The role lacks clarity and definition, with role descriptions not adequately describing the expectations.
- There appeared to be a lack of positional power in the role.
- Lack of time was a key frustration for focus group participants, with the quality of preparation for their classroom teaching suffering as a result. This may deter potential future middle level leaders from taking up the role.
- Additional administrative support could prove helpful in creating more time.

Pastoral middle level leaders.

Consistent with the disparities across different groups of middle level leaders noted earlier, one focus group member raised what she saw as issues of equity among curriculum leaders and pastoral leaders. There was a feeling prevalent amongst some in the focus groups that pastoral leaders had more time to dedicate to their particular roles, as well as having their own office space for their work. Curriculum leaders though, do not have these “luxuries”. What was not acknowledged was the often confidential nature of discussions that take place with students and staff in pastoral roles, sometimes necessitating the need for a discrete space. Also noted was the sense of team that pastoral leaders tended to create, which did not seem as apparent for curriculum teams. Given the often physical close proximity of pastoral middle level leaders to each other, these teams have increased opportunities

for shared discussion. Similar to the sentiments expressed by the interviewees, another focus group participant noted “there’s coordinators and there’s coordinators.” The pastoral coordinators were seen to have a greater sense of collegial networking both within and between schools. Table 5.20 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.20

Comparisons with Pastoral Middle Level Leaders

• According to curriculum middle level leaders, pastoral or year level middle level leaders appeared to have more time, more opportunities for networking and a more visible, and at times, respected role than curriculum middle level leaders.

5.3.3 Evolution of and changes to the role.

Pedagogical practice and change.

Participants in the focus groups suggested that the role was changing, and that recent curriculum and technology changes had impacted significantly on how the role was now construed. In addition, changes to classroom practices including the way in which students learnt and engaged were also forcing a shift in both teacher roles and the role of middle level leaders. One participant suggested that middle level leaders needed to rethink the approach to teaching altogether, thus impacting on the work they might do with their teachers.

While the focus group middle level leaders saw the value of engaging in lesson observation with colleagues, in reality this rarely occurred. In concert with the interview participants, circumstances included lack of time. However,

some also saw this as a difficult culture to build in their faculty, as some teachers would find it threatening or indeed the middle level leaders themselves might feel uncomfortable about doing it as it was not something commonly undertaken in the role. One participant acknowledged “how little I actually get into their classrooms and see their own pedagogy.” Another participant in the same focus group felt it was not part of his role to observe members of his faculty in the act of teaching:

> *I find it a bit daunting the fact that I’m going to go in and look at a person who’s a professional who’s been teaching for quite a while, because our faculty is quite aged.* (Antonio)

Currently, any observation of others was seen to be accidental or informal:

> *We walk in on classes to get something out of the room and go back but I don’t actually sit in and listen to a lesson from go to whoa and I’ve never thought that that was part of my role.* (Lance)

This feeling was reinforced by another focus group participant who spoke of spending some time in the class of a teacher to see what the class was doing, but only when the teacher was absent. A couple of focus group members spoke about the use of glass walls in adjoining classrooms being useful to observe the classroom teaching of a colleague in an informal way. Some middle level leaders in the same school observed each other’s lessons to look for the elements of a quality lesson. One middle level leader spoke of the steps she has taken to video her teaching for others to code her lessons

using the NSW Quality Teaching Framework. She suggested there was fear around this initially because there are “a lot of closed classrooms still in our school.” In addition, she cautioned that “it’s very risky business.” Nonetheless, the school leadership team was trying to encourage the sharing of classroom practice and the middle leadership team was leading this endeavour in this school.

Generally, the emphasis of the role in the two focus groups was more on sharing resources and collaborating with ideas with the faculty meeting as a place where this could be facilitated. Although there was acknowledgement that faculty meetings were more often than not mostly about administration, there was some effort in most schools to try to make them more about professional development where teachers learn from each other. Table 5.21 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.21

Pedagogical Practice and Faculty Meetings

- Focus group participants revealed an understanding that classroom observations and monitoring were desirable, but in reality they did not happen. Lack of time and lack of ease in doing so were given as reasons.
- Collaboration efforts centred on sharing of resources and ideas.
- Faculty meetings seemed to concentrate on administrative matters, though some were making efforts to turn them into professional development opportunities.

5.3.4 Expectations of middle level leaders.

Middle level leaders in the focus groups noted that they did not have a clear understanding of what the role actually entailed. Indeed for many, the role lacked clarity and was ill-defined. One participant laughed as she said “if you can define my role I’d be really happy!” This lack of definition was highlighted by comments that suggested that the members of their faculty teams (i.e., teachers) had varying expectations of them in regard to what they should do in the role and what was the responsibility of the classroom teachers themselves. Table 5.22 summarises the key points here.

Table 5.22

Role Definition

• Middle level leaders felt that the role was ill-defined and expectations of them in the role were not made clear.

5.3.5 Possibilities for unfulfilled potential.

The middle level leaders in the focus groups did not provide the same level of commentary about the possibility of unfulfilled potential in their roles as did the eight participant middle level leaders in the interviews. From the focus group sessions however, middle level leaders felt constrained by the amount of paperwork they had to do, and the data entry they were also required to complete, thereby limiting their potential to do more productive tasks with their faculty teams. Participants were able to readily articulate how they would like to better exert their leadership:

> *I would like to lead more in academic excellence and rigour.* (Vesna)

I'd rather be leading staff in excellence. (Penelope)

One middle level leader reported that if they were to do things differently, and implement a different model of teaching and learning, they would need to take care of this change as middle level leaders themselves:

Forget about the upper level of management at the school, and organise it amongst ourselves. (Petra)

5.4 Synthesis and summary of findings from middle level leaders

There was a high degree of congruence in the findings across the middle level leaders interviewed and the middle level leaders from the focus group sessions. In large part, the middle level leaders in general agreed that the role was a complex one with myriad tasks, responsibilities and skills and qualities required. The ability to lead a team, forge positive relationships and to lead the implementation of the curriculum were all aspects noted by the majority of middle level leaders. Lack of time in which to carry out the role and the administrative burden was also a feature of the discussions. The call for more secretarial support was made by many. Participants in the interviews spoke about their role in leading in a Catholic context. This was supported by focus group participants. Those engaged in the interviews were vocal about the varying quality of their colleague middle level leaders.

While the role was seen to have a level of autonomy in it, middle level leaders noted that there was limited formal decision-making power or

authority. Both the interviewees and the focus group participants felt that the role needed better definition and clarity and the majority of middle level leaders felt the role had changed and grown over time. Those in the interviews reported having little involvement or impact as leaders beyond their own school community, though those in regional areas felt more obligation in their local community than did their city counterparts.

Middle level leaders reported informal rather than formal observation of lessons and related professional learning engagement with their teachers. Many noted the collaborative spirit that existed in their faculty teams, while some focus group participants felt that they had to coerce or gently ask their team members to complete tasks and to meet deadlines as a result of holding little positional power or authority.

Both the interviewees and the focus group participants felt that pastoral middle level leaders enjoyed recognition and status superior to the curriculum middle level leaders in their school setting. Focus group participants were less forthcoming with regard to unfulfilled potential in the role, whereas the interviewees were more vocal about the ways in which their potential to lead pedagogical practice and to contribute to the leadership of the school may be enhanced with less control and more distribution of leadership. Table 5.23 provides a summary of the findings from all middle level leaders.

Table 5.23

Summary of Findings from all Middle Level Leaders (Interviews and Focus Groups)

Research question	Middle level leaders
The role in action	• The role was seen as multi-faceted and complex with an array of tasks and responsibilities including curriculum implementation, administrative tasks and contribution to the school-wide strategic agenda. • A host of skills and qualities were required. • Middle level leaders played a linking, or conduit role. between class teachers and senior leaders, often resulting in them feeling like the “meat in the sandwich”. • Building a team, enthusing others and being an advocate for the faculty was important, as were high-quality relationships. • The importance of leading in, and contributing to, the Catholic context was articulated clearly by participants. • Networking, mentoring and professional development in dealing with difficult staff were desired. • Post graduate study had been helpful in assisting with the role. • Concerns were expressed about the quality of colleague middle level leaders.
Role description versus lived experience	• There was a good sense of autonomy in the role, predicated on trust, but with little decision-making or positional power. • Lack of time to do the role with insufficient administrative support. Class preparation suffered as a result. This was seen as a disincentive for the role. • Little evidence of involvement in leadership activity beyond the school community. • The role would benefit from better clarity and role definition. • Comparisons with pastoral middle level leader roles left the study participants feeling less affirmed, recognised and important.
Evolution of and changes to the role	• The role had changed and grown with technology having had an impact. • Expectations had increased. • While classroom observations and shared pedagogical practice were desirable there was a reluctance to engage in these activities through lack of time and/or lack of ease in doing so. • Faculty meeting time tended to concentrate on administration, though some efforts were being made to focus on professional development. • Few expressed aspiration to further leadership roles.
Expectations of middle level leaders	• Implementation of curriculum. • Implement the vision of the principal. • Expectations were not made clear. • Middle level leaders felt there was a good alignment between principals and themselves. • The quality of middle level leaders varied. • Mentoring of their staff was seen as part of the role, but middle level leaders desired access to mentoring for themselves.
Possibilities for unfulfilled potential	• Some senior leaders were reluctant to delegate or distribute leadership. Some were viewed as controlling. • There was potential for middle level leaders to exert more leadership particularly in terms of pedagogy. • Some felt frustrated about their lack of opportunity to lead. This was sometimes because of colleague middle level leaders not just senior leaders. • Distributed leadership allowed for the possibility for many others to lead in a school setting. • Limitations of time and the burden of paperwork precluded the potential for exploring other aspects of the role.

5.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the findings from the eight participants in the study from the two rounds of interviews as well as the two focus groups that were conducted. Chapter Six presents the findings from principals and from the document analyses. The chapter concludes with the themes that have emerged from all of the collected data.

Chapter 6

Findings from Principal Interviews and Document Analyses

6.1 Introduction

Chapter Six reports on the interviews with the principals of the middle level leaders in the study, together with the findings from the document analyses. The data are reported in a descriptive manner, with the synthesis and key messages emerging from the research being devoted to Chapters Seven and Eight. This chapter uses a similar framework, based on the research questions, to that employed in the literature review and previous chapter. Similarly, quotes of participants (presented in italics) are used throughout to authentically capture the voices of the participants and to illustrate key points being made. Pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity. The emerging themes are presented at the end of this chapter, synthesising the findings from all participant groups. Table 6.1 outlines the structural framework employed in this Chapter, based on the research questions.

Table 6.1

Relationship of Chapter Six to the Research Questions

Chapter 6	Research question
Principals	
The role in action	Question 1
Role description versus lived experience	Question 2
Evolution of and changes to the role	Question 3
Expectations of middle level leaders	Question 4
Possibilities for unfulfilled potential	Question 5
Document analyses	
The role in action	Question 1
Role description versus lived experience	Question 2
Themes	Questions 1-5

As in Chapter Five, summary tables are included to provide the reader with easy reference to the main emerging findings.

6.2 Principals

6.2.1 The role in action.

All of the principals spoke about the linking or conduit role that middle level leaders play in supporting and assisting with the implementation of the school's vision. The conduit role was about ensuring the teachers had representatives (i.e., middle level leaders) who would voice their concerns, issues and ideas at executive level. In turn, the middle level leaders were expected to communicate decisions and directions from the executive back to the staff. Hamish described this interchange thus:

> *I see the role as a conduit in many ways between what's happening at executive level back to them to then feed that back to their staff. But equally importantly they are able to feed back to the executive how the staff are feeling.*

Frank echoed the importance of this information exchange:

> *Importantly, information down and information up. It is important to be able to sell effectively the decisions that are made at management not just simply say, oh, the principal said.*

Adam saw the prime responsibility of middle level leaders in this light:

> *I think contributing to school culture and vision and direction: that's the number one and all of the other duties sort of fall out of that.*

The contributions that middle level leaders made to the school's vision was seen as helpful in informing the vision middle level leaders had for their own department or faculty area:

> *There's a large proportion of vision and visioning for their own area that they are responsible for and doing that in accordance with the vision that's the school vision, the whole school vision, sort of aligning those.*

The importance of middle level leaders making active contributions to the school's strategic plan was noted, though some principals afforded greater responsibility than others in this area. Bill noted:

Studies coordinators do play a big part in deciding what's in the strategic plan. It's comments from the studies coordinators quite often over the last couple of years that have resulted in a better plan the next year.

However, their work was often not concerned with vision. Steven argued that middle level leaders were mainly focussed on reacting to situations rather than attending directly to student learning. More specifically, each principal listed the kinds of things that middle level leaders undertook in their role. These included, at the faculty or department level:

- leading their faculty;
- demonstrating knowledge and understanding of curriculum;
- attending to scope and sequence, programming, assessments, registers and managing marks;
- keeping up to date with current developments in their area of responsibility;
- ensuring compliance with government and diocesan expectations;
- analysing results;
- attending to student discipline issues;
- supporting teachers;
- being responsible for decision-making;
- showing initiative; and
- engaging in professional reading.

Bill suggested that they attended to the "nuts and bolts" or the "nitty gritty" mechanics of running their faculty. Principals saw the day-to-day organisation

of their faculty taking precedence and consuming most of their time. In concert with the middle level leaders' views, every principal spoke about the burden that middle level leaders carry regarding paperwork. Frank acknowledged that the amount of paperwork had grown considerably in recent years to the point where it overshadowed other aspects of their role. Steven noted:

> *To me a curriculum leader at the moment is somebody that's doing management tasks. They're ticking the boxes. They're getting the rosters done. They're getting registers done. Everything's nice, neat.*

Two principals, Bill and Steven, wondered if some of the clerical tasks of middle level leaders could be taken on by administrative staff to lessen the burden of paperwork.

All of the principals expressed a desire for their middle level leaders to take a much more active role in professionally developing the classroom practices of their staff, including observing teachers in the act of teaching for improvement. To date, however, they all agreed that this was unfortunately not happening to any meaningful extent. Constraining reasons offered for this situation included a lack of time, lack of ability or the lack of school structures to allow this to happen. While they were not blaming the middle level leaders for classroom observation not being a more prominent part of their role, they lamented that it was not able to have a greater priority. The emphasis, according to principals, was on management as opposed to leadership. Steven suggested reasons for this:

It could be that they don't have enough time, they don't have enough support, they don't have enough resources. Whatever the reasons are, but they don't have those conversations with their faculty.

Similarly, Bill did not blame middle level leaders for concentrating on the day-to-day organisation instead of working at improving classroom practices, but rather wondered whether they had the self-belief to attend to this aspect of the role. He also reflected on what senior school leaders could be doing to facilitate this happening:

The bulk of the studies coordinators on the other hand are much more – they hear it and it's all too hard. I don't think they quite know how to do it, or trust themselves to actually do it. I think it's a belief thing. And again, it comes back to the executive. How do we help these people to actually get a better sense of self, a better sense of confidence, more skills so that they can do that?

Bill also suggested that, in his experience, middle level leaders seemed to prefer to concentrate on the management at the expense of the potential leadership aspects of the role:

Most of what studies coordinators do certainly in this school and in other schools is the mundane. It's the mechanics, the management of the curriculum in a particular area rather than what I would see as leadership.

They do a lot of the nitty-gritty nuts and bolts running of their faculty and I think for most of them, that's it.

Table 6.2 summarises the key points here.

Table 6.2

Principals' Views of the Role in Action

- Principals saw middle level leaders as a conduit between the senior leadership team and their faculty classroom teachers. Implementing the vision of the senior leaders was part of the role.
- Middle level leaders frequently concentrated on the day-to-day aspects of running their faculty, with paperwork and administration tasks consuming most of their time. Additional administrative support could assist in ameliorating these demands.
- Leading pedagogical practices was not given the prominence that it might or should have. Principals desired more involvement in this aspect of a middle level leader's role.
- Middle level leaders acted more as managers of day-to-day activities than leaders of learning. More support and guidance for middle level leaders was desirable.

Preparation and training for the role.

All of the principals in the study agreed that most middle level leaders had been involved in very little, if any, training prior to taking up the role. Any preparation that they had received had been almost accidental, or that it had occurred "almost by osmosis", according to Hamish. Principals believed that the preparation was limited to opportunities to act in the position when other middle level leaders had vacated a position temporarily or that they had developed their skills by observing and working with their predecessors. Two of the principals argued that the system should provide more structured

preparation programs for middle level leaders, while another acknowledged that his school had provided little formal preparation and support in a strategically organised manner.

Professional development.

Principals acknowledged that the approach to the professional development opportunities for middle level leaders were somewhat haphazard. They nominated their diocesan KLA network meetings as an avenue for ongoing professional development, but acknowledged that this was limited in focus and not enough on its own if middle level leaders were to realise their full potential. Again, some principals had the view that it was the diocesan office that should provide more systematised professional development. Even so, one principal readily admitted that his school had failed to provide appropriate professional learning for his middle level leaders, an omission in his view:

> *What have I provided? None. Wouldn't even say very little. I've provided no strategic development to support them in their role as the coordinator. I've basically outsourced it.* (Steven)

One principal also argued that middle level leaders should be leading professional development in their faculty for their teachers, a role they were not currently doing. Principals encouraged middle level leaders to join their professional teachers' associations and to seek ongoing professional development for themselves and their faculty. One principal indicated that he

provided a session in financial and budget management for incoming middle level leaders. Table 6.3 summarises the key points here.

Table 6.3

Preparation, Training and Professional Development

- There was little preparation or training for the role and limited opportunity to learn about the role prior to appointment.
- Professional development opportunities were haphazard. System approaches could be improved and school principals could take more of a role in organising professional development for middle level leaders.

Leading in a Catholic context.

Somewhat surprisingly, principals provided almost no comment with respect to leadership in a Catholic context and the role that middle level leaders play in this regard. Where some comment was offered, one explicitly named being a role model in a "Christ-centred manner", with two others mentioning the faith element of leadership in a very general way. Otherwise, the responsibility that middle level leaders held in this domain was largely ignored by principals, or at least was not high on their agendas. Another possibility is that the discussion in the interviews simply did not naturally flow to this topic.

Building and leading a team.

Overwhelmingly, principals expressed a desire for their middle level leaders to take a leadership role in building the capacity of staff in their faculty and supporting them in their work as teachers. They also wanted them to develop and maintain healthy relationships among staff. Other aspects of their role

were seen to include collaboration, professional learning and working with people. Principals again acknowledged that the lack of time middle level leaders seemed to have precluded them from having much impact at times with their team. Adam summed up the team aspect of the role by saying:

> *Leading and encouraging with great enthusiasm, passion for teaching and learning—quality teaching and learning.*

Table 6.4 summarises the key points here.

Table 6.4

Catholic Ethos, Relationships and Team Building

- There was little acknowledgement from principals about the role middle level leaders played in articulating or contributing to the Catholic ethos of the school.
- Relationships were seen to be important in building a team, as was building the capacity of staff.

Colleague middle level leaders.

Principals made few specific comments about the quality of the middle level leadership group in their school, although Frank pointedly noted:

> *From my perspective, some of them struggle to be middle leaders.*

Later in this chapter, the expectations of principals regarding their middle level leaders are explored. This adds another dimension to the degree to which principals felt that they had quality leadership in their school at this level.

Skills and qualities of middle level leaders.

Considerably fewer comments were made by principals than by middle level leaders themselves about the professional and personal qualities and attributes they believed made a successful middle level leader. Naturally, those holding the role would perhaps be more keenly aware of these qualities than principals might. What principals did mention in terms of these attributes included: skills in communication; confidentiality; being able to see the big picture; presence and calmness; passion for teaching; the ability to develop quality, positive relationships; and being a high quality classroom teacher to act as a role model for others. One principal said that keeping the peace and keeping the faculty happy were major parts of their role. The most powerful and agreed theme from principals here highlighted the need to build the capacity of the faculty team members by being supportive of staff, encouraging them and developing their skills.

Rewards in the role.

Principals identified what they saw as the rewards that middle level leaders experienced in the role including the satisfaction of leading a faculty that was seen to be doing well, getting good results and holding a key a role in the school that was focused on students and their learning. Principals also saw rewards stemming from the building of support in a faculty team, with good communication, where continuous improvement and the development of quality teaching and assessment programs were apparent.

6.2.2 Role description versus lived experience.

In living out their roles, principals expected middle level leaders to be experts in their particular curriculum area and to know the curriculum that they were leading. In a similar vein to the middle level leaders themselves, principals readily identified a comprehensive list of the kinds of tasks that they felt middle level leaders engaged in as part of their role. As already noted above, while middle level leaders were seen to concentrate on administrative and paperwork tasks, principals expressed a strong preference for them to be powerful curriculum leaders in their schools. The preferred roles and actual roles in practice were two different things. By example, Hamish, after having outlined what he would have liked middle level leaders to be responsible for, suggested that the reality was that they concentrated on day-to-day, mundane organisational matters rather than higher order leadership aspects such as setting direction for their faculty, leading professional development of teachers and, hence, building the capacity of staff and engaging in research. Bill concurred and said that the “mechanics” of the role dominated with respect to “managing the curriculum as opposed to leadership.” This view was echoed by all of the other principals. Frank felt that some middle level leaders were happy to concentrate on the day-to-day:

> *Some coordinators will see their role as quite pedantic; they’ll tick the boxes and tell you they're the greatest coordinators in the whole world.*

Limitations on the role.

As already noted, all of the principals readily acknowledged that middle level leaders had a limited amount of time in which to carry out their duties (actual

and preferred). Time was inadequate for them to do everything that they would like them to be doing, especially leading and developing the classroom practice of staff. It appears that what dominates the time of middle level leaders is administrative work, paperwork and day-to-day tasks, leaving little or no time to engage in other activities, as noted above. Bill summed up the general feeling of principals with this comment:

> *By the time they get all the nitty-gritty nuts and bolts done, by the time they deal with [people] and all of the different personalities, they're probably dead tired and the last thing they want to think about is what brilliant thing can I come up with, what new initiative can I come up with to try to improve the learning of these students.*

Two principals spoke candidly not only about the lack of sufficient time allocation for the role but also about the relatively poor remuneration that accompanies it. According to these principals, the level of remuneration does not provide a good foundation for attracting future middle level leaders to the role. Addressing remuneration and time allocation issue were seen as two possible ways to make the role of middle level leaders more attractive, and hence of greater interest to potential and higher quality aspirants. Table 6.5 summarises the key points here.

Table 6.5

Skills, Qualities and Limitations on the Role of Middle Level Leaders

- Middle level leaders act as a role model for others and build the capacity of their team.
- Middle level leaders should be high quality classroom practitioners.
- There were many rewarding aspects of the role including leading a successful faculty and building a strong team.
- Time limitations precluded middle level leaders from doing much more than administering the faculty. They tended to manage curriculum rather than lead learning.
- Better remuneration and time allocation may make the role more desirable and may attract higher quality candidates in the future.

Pastoral middle level leaders.

In a similar vein to the middle level leaders, principals offered commentary about the different qualities of curriculum and pastoral leaders in their schools. They acknowledged some tension between the two groups of middle level leaders and suggested that curriculum leaders did not have the same profile in schools as pastoral leaders. One principal, Bill, posited that this may be due to the prominence that pastoral care had in a Catholic school context; and, therefore, a focus on the care of students was a priority and expressed overtly. Adam, however, suggested that there were particular personality types that were drawn to the two different middle leadership roles with pastoral leaders being perhaps “more big picture people.” Adam also referred to the tension that was often present between the two groups.

Dealing with difficult staff.

Two principals suggested that middle level leaders were reluctant to deal with issues associated with difficult staff members and that they would rather pass

this responsibility on to someone else. Their role was bound up in being a leader of colleague teachers, where they often saw themselves as more of an equal with their teachers than a line manager. Anne explained this difficulty:

> *Sometimes it comes as somewhat confronting when middle leaders realise that they do have a leadership role and that sometimes you can't be friends with everybody as much as you'd like. And in my experience I don't think some coordinators take that on board terribly well. I think they do want to be everybody's friends and so when there's an issue of performance or there's an issue of poor teaching that they don't want to deal with it.*

6.2.3 Evolution of and changes to the role.

Of the six principals in the study, five suggested that the role had changed significantly in recent years. The remaining principal said that the role had not changed much although he acknowledged that the amount of administration and paperwork that was required had increased. Principals spoke about the changing expectations of parents and how "helicopter parenting" impacted on the work of middle level leaders. Parents paying particularly close attention to their children's experiences, problems, issues or learning, had resulted in increased scrutiny of the work of middle level leaders. This was inclusive of their interactions with students, the behaviour management of students, and the marking of assessment tasks and examinations. The number of learning support students in schools had also increased with subsequent impact on middle level leaders.

In a similar manner, the principal of the senior college reported the degree to which students had access to information—about their courses and about their rights—had also impacted on the work of middle level leaders. The amount of information that is publicly available about syllabus requirements, as well as the performance of schools, has had an impact on the accountability of schools. The work of middle level leaders has been affected by increasing the pressure on them to be absolutely transparent about their teaching of the syllabus in strict accordance with statutory expectations.

Pedagogical practice and change.

Changes to curriculum and to teaching practices have forced staff to look at their roles in new ways, although many of the principals suggested that this had occurred, with mixed results. There was a growing expectation that middle level leaders would drive and influence the classroom practices of the teachers in their faculty. However, principals felt that there was an overwhelming reluctance on behalf of middle level leaders to actually carry out this aspect of their role. One principal reported that middle level leaders in general were reluctant to change, especially those who had been in the role for a significant period of time. Table 6.6 summarises the key points here.

Table 6.6

Tensions, Pedagogical Practice and Change

- There was some tension at times between the curriculum and pastoral middle level leaders. The pastoral leaders seemed to have a more prominent profile.
- Some middle level leaders were reluctant, or lacked the skills, to deal with difficult or underperforming staff as part of their role.
- The role has changed and grown. Middle level leaders were being forced to look at their role in different ways.
- There was reluctance on behalf of middle level leaders to explicitly develop and enhance the pedagogical practices of teachers.

6.2.4 Expectations of middle level leaders.

Alignment of expectations between middle level leaders and principals.

Principals were asked about what they expected of their middle level leaders (not just the participants in the study but indeed all of their middle level leaders) and the degree to which they thought their expectations aligned with the views of the middle level leaders themselves. Their responses were mixed. All the principals expected their middle level leaders to manage both the day-to-day tasks as well as make an active contribution to the strategic direction of the school through their involvement in activities such as building the vision, assisting with the directions for the school's strategic plan, the annual school improvement plan and through goal setting and other high-level tasks. They spoke about expecting that all relevant administration and paperwork would be completed by the middle level leaders, resources would be organised and provided, compliance was in order and accountabilities

met. Bill neatly emphasised the expectations that he had of middle level leaders in this domain:

> *I do expect all of the nuts and bolts to be done extremely effectively, up to date, knowing all of the Board of Studies requirements etcetera. I expect them to be people who are very organised and who utilise the faculty budget to actually improve their faculties.*

Adam expressed this expectation of his middle level leaders:

> *Well my expectations are pretty clear: that they buy into the culture and then help develop and support the vision and direction of the school.*

All principals expressed an expectation around curriculum leadership. Steven said:

> *The expectation would be that they're curriculum experts. They would know what really good learning and teaching looks like.*

Some principals made the clear distinction between leading and managing, with the emphasis being on the need for middle level leaders to actually lead:

> *I do expect them to be leaders especially in the area of quality teaching.* (Bill)

> *They must be quality leaders, they must demonstrate to the community, to the school, to the faculty, that they're in fact leaders not managers.* (Frank)

Steven expressed a caution regarding his comments, demonstrating an appreciation of the myriad expectations that people placed upon them:

> *I have to monitor myself all the time about not having too great an expectation on the coordinator in light of their other duties and tasks and that's unfair. I need my coordinators to be honest with me and being able to say no, we're being real in the expectations we have, that I have as principal.*

Considerable disparity arose when principals commented on the degree of alignment that principals held regarding role expectations compared with those middle level leaders had of themselves. In general, principals were not convinced that there was an overall alignment of role expectations. One principal, Anne, believed there was "not much" alignment:

> *There is probably not much alignment because I don't think some of them see that they have that leadership role. I think they see themselves as making sure that there's marks and there's scope and sequence. I do not think many of the middle leaders here are specific in following on what is actually happening in classrooms.*

Steven commented that he had changed his mind about the alignment of expectations in recent times. He now thought there was little fit between his expectations of the role and those of his middle leaders:

> *If you'd asked me last year I would've said it's a good match, but this year in light of our conversations that we've had around our data, our Higher School Certificate results, our NAPLAN results, I'd say no.*

Frank suggested that it was down to the individual regarding the alignment of expectations:

> *Some would have a great alignment. There'd be others that sadly haven't challenged themselves in the last ten years so it really is dependent on the individual.*

One principal said little about the degree of alignment of expectations other than to affirm the quality of the middle level leadership team in the school and the genuine partnership they had in working together:

> *I think we're pretty well on the same page. There's a good sense of team at this school.* (Adam)

With one exception, the principals saw a degree of misalignment in their expectations to that of their middle level leaders.

Variations in middle level leader quality.

Overall, the principals were far more critical of the role that some of their middle level leaders played, compared with how the middle level leaders rated themselves in the role. Principals said there were distinct individual differences in the quality of the leadership the middle level leaders provided. Each principal could nominate outstanding middle level leaders and did so unprompted. However, they were also quite critical of others, whom they suggested did not engage in crucial work with teachers that changed and improved educational outcomes. On this aspect, Steven noted that “we tend to feel that our people are with us and they’re not. There’s little conversation around pedagogy.” Table 6.7 summarises the key points here.

Table 6.7

Principals’ Expectations

- Principals expected their middle level leaders to take care of day-to-day management of the faculty as well as making a contribution to the strategic decision-making of the school. They also expected them to be curriculum experts and to build strong relationships with their faculty members.
- In general, principals saw little alignment of expectations with their middle level leaders. There was a criticism of the quality of some in the role.

Expectations that others had of middle level leaders.

Principals also commented about the expectations they believed middle level leaders held of themselves. They indicated generally that these agreed with the expectations that they thought classroom teachers would have of them.

Adam suggested that at times, middle level leaders concentrated on their own “turf” rather than on the bigger picture of school leadership:

> *They can become compartmentalised and see their faculty and their domain rather than the big picture.*

Frank pointed to the variable quality among the middle level leadership group, with some who were happy to challenge and innovate while other middle level leaders promoted the status quo:

> *Some of them would see themselves as quality leaders and they’re happy to challenge the status quo. They’re quite happy to challenge me as the principal. On the other hand, we’ve got those who see themselves as very effective in their role and they’re nothing more than managers: managers of a department who are outstanding with their paperwork or whatever, but they’re doing the same old same old as ten years ago and they will be in ten years’ time.*

When principals discussed the expectations that they thought classroom teachers had of their middle level leaders, the general feeling was that they thought teachers wanted the day-to-day organisation to be done well and the paperwork completed. Ensuring adequate resources were available and support offered with student behaviour management was noted as other expectations. Bill summarised:

Most people below the executive level I think would simply want and expect studies coordinators to do the nuts and bolts, that's all. They want to know that they've got the resources that they should have. They want to know their classrooms are nice places to be.

Adam elaborated:

I think the teaching staff would have a clear expectation they're organised, they provide them with sufficient resources both physical and in material goods and teaching resources. It would be an expectation too that they support them with a difficult child. Teachers would expect that they would be supported with some PD aspirations. They would expect they are hard working.

The expectations of middle level leaders from principals' perspectives were suggestive of some dissatisfaction with the role as it was currently experienced in their schools. While acknowledging some of the constraints on the role, there was a general feeling that more could be done. A key theme emerging from the principal interviews was the role that they might play in better equipping their middle level leaders to do and be more than day-to-day managers. Table 6.8 summarises the key points here.

Table 6.8

Principals' Views on Classroom Teacher Expectations of Middle Level Leaders

• Principals suggested that classroom teachers would expect middle level leaders to largely take care of the day-to-day administration of the faculty in supporting them.

Contribution to the strategic direction of the school.

As previously mentioned, the principals commented on considerable variability in the role middle level leaders played in the strategic direction of the school. Hamish observed:

> *Some of them come to our leadership team meetings and some of them just sit there quite passively and they don't engage in the conversation, they don't engage in that broader school dimension.*

Likewise, Anne expressed a desire for middle level leaders to have an active say in what happened at a whole-school level:

> *Some of them are reticent about that because they really don't care about strategic improvement, they just want to come and do their own job in their own faculty, teaching their own things.*

Steven also acknowledged that this was the case in his school but perhaps this needed to be better facilitated by principals in providing a structure that was more conducive to their participation. Table 6.9 summarises the key points here.

Table 6.9

Contributions to the Strategic Future of the School

• Principals expected middle level leaders to contribute to the discussion at leadership level about the strategic future of the school but lamented the lack of input of some in this arena.

6.2.5 Possibilities for unfulfilled potential.

Principals expressed a desire to for middle level leaders to adopt greater leadership roles in the school. They suggested that the mundane day-to-day tasks consumed the time and energy of middle level leaders at the expense of developing the capacities of teachers in the faculty. Principals provided examples of how and what they would prefer their middle level leaders to spend their time doing in the role. Some of these included:

> *Looking at best practice and how can I model and practise that with my staff. Observing each other teaching.* (Hamish)

> *They don't go and lead at a conference, which is a shame because some of them should and would have a lot to offer.* (Adam)

There was clearly potential for much more sharing of skills, ideas and initiatives with others in the broader educational community. Some principals readily acknowledged their important role in helping middle level leaders realise their potential in the role, and also were prepared to admit that while this formed part of their responsibility, they often did not attend to this. Bill noted:

> *How do we help those people to actually get a better sense of self, a better sense of confidence you know, more skills so that can do that [lead high-quality classroom practices]?* (Bill)

Steven reinforced this sentiment with:

We've got to give them recognition and we've got to give them support to then develop other teachers.

He also suggested that, perhaps, principals and other senior leaders in education had let middle level leaders down, by not providing them with the time, support and resources to lead learning. Rather, they had been left to perform largely clerical and administrative tasks. He named them "the forgotten leaders."

A noteworthy finding from the principals was the profile of the middle level leaders. Some principals mentioned that, if their school profile was increased, this may have an impact on their role and how it might be enacted in the future. On a related matter, one principal in particular suggested that middle level leaders in his school could work more cohesively as a team and to build a culture of teamwork.

In general, the principals' responses regarding unfulfilled potential in the role were centred on actively leading the learning in classrooms and modelling teaching practice with staff:

I'd love to see them in classrooms; observing, supporting, monitoring. (Adam)

Trying to get them to realise their leadership goal, their leadership role especially in quality teaching, actually modelling that themselves and then trying to get their faculties to come on board with that. (Bill)

If we say our coordinators are leaders of learning then how do they mentor the teacher who has only been teaching one or two years and how do we pass on that intellectual quality or wisdom that's been learnt over a number of years? (Anne)

As noted earlier, another aspect for consideration in the role was the contribution that middle level leaders made to the wider school strategic agenda and future. Anne commented that her school had attempted to "distribute responsibility and leadership in areas outside their learning area" for middle level leaders to take a more active role in strategic planning processes. Table 6.10 summarises the key points here.

Table 6.10

Principals' Views on Unfulfilled Potential in the Role

- There was potential for middle level leaders to make a more active contribution to classroom practices; leading and modelling high quality learning and to contribute to the strategic future of the school.
- Principals acknowledged they had a role to raise the profile of middle level leaders and help them to realise their potential.

The next section presents the findings from the document analyses. These documents served to provide additional data sets as well as triangulating the data from the interviews with middle level leaders and principals.

6.3 Document Analyses

All groups of participants (i.e., the middle level leader participant interviewees and the principals) were asked, on a number of occasions, to provide any documentation they had that related to the role of middle level leaders in their schools. Suggestions included role descriptions, statements of responsibilities, meeting minutes and so on. Table 6.11 lists the kinds of documents that were provided for analyses.

Table 6.11

Documents Provided for Analyses

Document type	Description
Vacant position advertisement	8 position advertisements detailing the position description, essential and desirable criteria from a variety of schools across the system of schools in the study.
Faculty meeting minutes	2 sets of faculty meeting minutes from one school. 1 set of faculty meeting minutes from a different school.
Middle leadership team minutes	1 set of middle leadership team minutes from one school.
E-mail correspondence	1 e-mail from a principal regarding role descriptions.
Role descriptions	3 schools role descriptions/middle leader responsibilities.

A possible reason for the lack of documentation provided could be that in some schools, a role description or any formal statement of responsibility for a middle level leader simply did not exist. In this regard, a number of participants in the study and their principals were unsure if there was a role description for middle level leaders in operation at the school. One middle level leader in the study indicated that meeting minutes were not kept at their

school for faculty meetings. There are obvious limitations here as to what can be drawn from the document study given the paucity of materials presented.

6.3.1 The role in action.

Faculty meeting minutes were provided by two middle level leader participants in the study. One middle level leader provided minutes from two meetings and one middle level leader provided one set of minutes from one meeting. From the documents provided, the bulk of materials suggested largely administrative tasks dominated meetings. Included were things such as information, assessment and reporting schedules, timetabling, rooming, meeting schedules, excursion information and the like. One faculty had embarked on a project to develop a video resource for students. Funding had been provided for this and teaching staff were engaged in discussing who would be involved in developing the video lessons and the logistics of developing the resource. The other faculty engaged in discussion on developing collaborative teaching practice and how a team teaching space might best be used to facilitate collaborative learning opportunities.

In addition, one middle level leader presented minutes from a “management meeting.” This group consisted of all of the middle level leaders in the school, including pastoral middle level leaders. This document provided an indication as to how the role was being carried out by middle level leaders in one school context. Again, the agenda was largely administrative in nature, with emphasis being placed on the communication of decisions made from the executive being passed “down” to staff but also for the needs of the staff to be communicated to the executive via this team. Professional development,

curriculum, and a collaborative model of teamwork and leadership were also highlighted. Table 6.12 summarises the key points here.

Table 6.12

Document Analyses

- Administrative matters dominated in the documents provided.
- Collaborative teaching practice and teamwork was encouraged.
- Middle level leaders served as a communication channel between senior leaders and classroom teachers.

6.3.2 Role description versus lived experience.

Vacant position advertisements, e-mail correspondence from one principal and role descriptions provided some basic data regarding the role descriptions compared with the lived experience of the role. From the eight position advertisements that were sourced, all of them followed the system required pro-forma style that was produced by the diocesan education office. Position requirements provided the details about the selection requirements of the role. Essential and desirable criteria were spelled out. There was a high degree of similarity across the documents provided.

Position descriptions all required the applicant to manage a KLA or group of subjects, with membership of a middle management, management or leadership team also forming part of the role. One position description required the middle leader to “support the principal of the school.” All of the advertisements detailed the position description in similar ways highlighting aspects such as the Catholic ethos or religious dimension of the school, the

teaching and learning program, school policies and procedures, and membership of the management team of the school.

Generally, the position requirements were almost identical for each advertisement. The only variation that appeared in any of the advertisements was a specific school-based statement (i.e., details about the particular schools where the position was located). Each advertisement listed a series of requirements that included: the demonstration of commitment to, and understanding of, the nature of Catholic education; syllabus knowledge; the supervision of staff to ensure effective teaching; teaching programs; assessment and reporting programs; literacy and numeracy; ICT skills; and the support of staff with classroom management of students. As expected, "selection criteria" in all cases provided information about award requirements and the applicants' capacity to meet diocesan expectations regarding qualifications of the position.

One e-mail was received from a principal following the researcher's request for role descriptions to be provided. This principal wrote to acknowledge that, to his surprise, the school did not have a role statement for a middle level leader (either in curriculum or in pastoral care). He indicated that he intended to rectify this and have role descriptions written for the staff handbook for the following year.

Documents were provided from three schools about middle level leader roles. Each of these was submitted on the understanding that they constituted a role description of some sort. They largely consisted of a dot point list of

responsibilities that used the wording of the requirements of the role, as used for position advertisements. Once school did provide a comprehensive role statement with four main areas of responsibility: general; curriculum; staff; and students. The role statement included the contribution that middle level leaders made to the studies coordinator team, which was responsible for curriculum and pedagogical leadership and acted as an advisory body to the school executive and principal. It also contained detail on the various aspects of the role including leadership of the faculty, the coordination of all aspects of the management, and the delivery of the curriculum. In terms of working with staff, the statement specified professional development, curriculum development, the conduct of faculty meetings, assisting staff and, as requested by the principal, the evaluation of staff. Ensuring that students were entered into the correct courses, having course materials published, and promoting academic excellence also formed part of the role.

No other schools provided role descriptions. In the round one interviews, participants were asked if there was a documented role description for the position at their school. Three middle level leaders said there was not one at their school, three said they did not know and two indicated there was a role description although one participant was not entirely sure there was one. As with many roles, another participant said the lived reality of the role was very different to what was written. Principals were asked the same question in their interviews, with all six of them affirming that their school had a documented role description, although four principals agreed that the role description was either insufficient or did not match what middle level leaders actually did. Reasons for few role descriptions being provided could be

because, in many schools, they either did not exist or were not in contemporary use, and were therefore not able to be readily found. Table 6.13 summarises the key points here.

Table 6.13

Role Descriptions

- Position advertisements concentrated on management activity, with Catholic ethos, curriculum knowledge, supervision of staff teaching programs and support of staff forming part of the description and expectation.
- Role descriptions were largely either absent or a re-print of the selection criteria for the role. Many schools did not provide a written role description.
- One school provided a detailed description that included general administration, and leadership of curriculum, staff and students.

6.4 Synthesis and Summary of Findings from Principals and Document Analyses

Principals acknowledged that they had a role to play in lifting the profile of middle level leaders and helping them to realise their potential. Principals also acknowledged that the constrained time that middle level leaders had to complete their role prevented them from attending to much more than the administrative or day-to-day aspects of the role. However, principals were desirous of their middle level leaders taking a more active role in leading the learning of their teachers in the faculty and being a role model for others. They also noted that middle level leaders should build quality relationships and build a strong faculty team. According to the principals, and echoing the middle level leaders themselves, the varying quality of some middle level

leaders was of concern. In a similar vein, the principals also recognised the lack of training and preparation middle level leaders had prior to taking up their role. The documents provided for analyses were limited in scope with few schools providing a role statement for their middle level leaders. Faculty meeting minutes provided for analyses suggested meetings that were largely administrative in nature. Table 6.14 provides a summary of the findings from the principals and document analyses.

Table 6.14

Summary of Findings from Principals and Document Analyses

Research question	Principals and document analyses
The role in action	• Building and maintaining relationships was important as was acting as a role model for staff. • Middle level leaders played a conduit role between senior leaders and classroom teachers. • They built the capacity of their faculty teams, administered the faculty and largely concentrated on paperwork and day-to-day tasks. • They assisted with the implementation of the vision of the senior leaders in the school. • Additional administrative support would be helpful. • There were many rewards in the role. • Few middle level leaders received any preparation or training for their role and professional development in the role was haphazard. • The quality of middle level leaders varied considerably. • Leading learning and pedagogical practices did not receive the prominence principals would like.
Role description versus lived experience	• Lack of time precluded middle level leaders from leading the learning. Better remuneration and more time may attract higher quality candidates in the future. • Role descriptions appeared to be inadequate or absent. • Some middle leaders appeared reluctant to deal with underperforming staff.
Evolution of and changes to the role	• The role had changed and grown. • There was reluctance to engage in direct observation of classroom practice of faculty staff members.
Expectations of middle level leaders	• Principals expected them to manage the day-to-day running of the faculty, be curriculum experts in their field and build strong relationships. They also were expected to make contributions to school-wide strategic agendas though some were reluctant to do the latter. • There was little alignment between principals' expectations and the expectations of middle level leaders about the role. • The quality of some middle level leaders was questionable.
Possibilities for unfulfilled potential	• There was potential for middle level leaders to make a more active contribution to the strategic agenda of the school, lead classroom practice and teaching and learning in their faculty. • Principals acknowledged their possible role in raising the profile of middle level leaders and helping middle level leaders realise their potential.

6.5 Themes

Common themes from the study emerged as well as some dissenting and contradictory voices. From the findings summarised in tables 5.23 and 6.14 presented in Chapters Five and Six respectively, there were eight themes that emerged. The themes are expressed in relation to the research questions posed in Chapter One. They are presented in table 6.15 and are discussed further in Chapter Seven.

Table 6.15

Themes Emerging From the Findings

Themes	Link to research question
1. The role in action: skills, requirements and preparation for the role	Question 1 Question 2 Question 3 Question 5
2. Professional development and professional learning	Question 1 Question 2 Question 3 Question 4
3. Middle level leaders and Catholic ethos	Question 1 Question 4
4. Managing or leading?	Question 1 Question 2 Question 5
5. Aspirations to further leadership	Question 3 Question 5
6. Differing expectations of middle level leaders	Question 4 Question 5
7. Colleague middle level leaders	Question 2 Question 4
8. Unfulfilled potential in the role	Question 5

Given that this study has explored the roles of middle level leaders, the emergent themes cannot be considered discrete as clearly there are obvious points of intersection and overlap. However, they do offer a helpful way to discuss the key messages from this study.

To recapitulate, the research questions were:

1. What do middle level leaders do in their role?
2. How do the articulated role descriptions (written and verbal) of middle level leaders match with the lived experience of their role?
3. How has the role of middle level leaders evolved over time?
4. In what ways do the expectations of principals align with those holding the role?
5. What, if anything, is the unfulfilled potential evident in the role of middle level leaders?

6.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings from the principal interviews and the document analyses. The findings were presented in a descriptive manner, with Chapters Seven and Eight providing the synthesis, key messages and recommendations from these findings. These findings were summarised (Table 6.14) in this chapter and combined with the findings presented (Table 5.23) in Chapter Five from the participant interviews and focus groups to produce eight themes. These themes form the basis of the discussion in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Seven

Discussion of Findings: Key Themes to Emerge

7.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the themes that have emerged from the findings presented in Chapters Five and Six. Presented in the Literature Review (Chapter Two) was the conceptual framework, which provided an overview of the role of middle level leaders as revealed in the literature. The framework established a lens to critically examine the findings of this particular study to identify the key themes. This chapter commences by briefly revisiting the conceptual framework then the themes are restated together with their relationships to the research questions posed for the study. The themes are examined in the context of the extant literature in the field. Following discussion of the themes, Chapter Eight provides a set of conclusions and recommendations about the role of middle level leadership relative to individual school contexts and cultures.

7.2 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework (Figure 7.1) presents an overview of what the literature reveals about the role of middle level leaders (current reality) as well as providing an indication of what the role could potentially look like in the future (potential future reality). The central section of the framework describes the research interest in this study, with the focus of the study and the research questions providing the impetus for the exploration of the role in one regional NSW Catholic school system. Following, is discussion which

draws on the framework to compare and contrast the themes that have emerged from the findings.

A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Role of Middle Level Leaders (MLLs): Current Realities and Potential Future Understandings

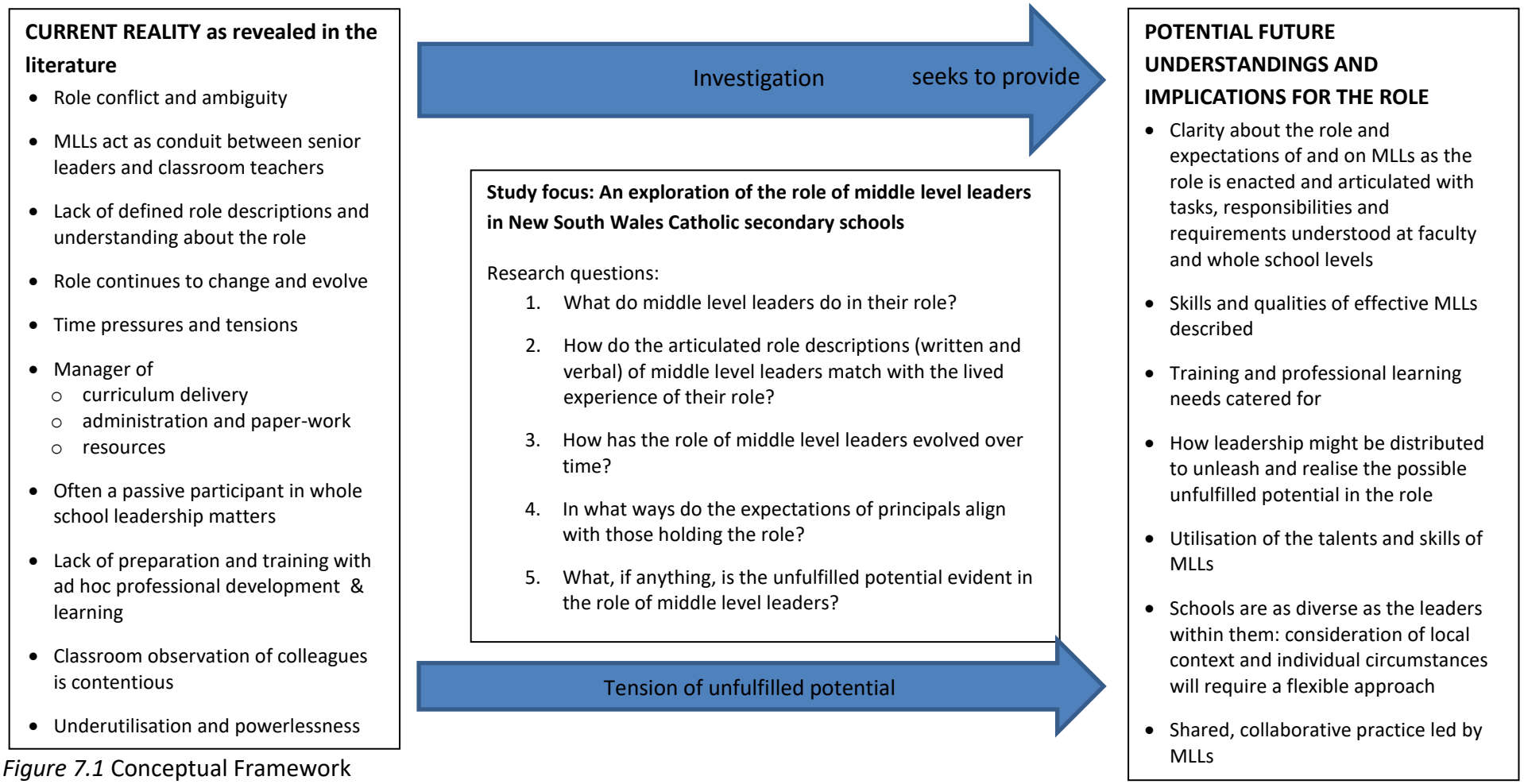

Figure 7.1 Conceptual Framework

7.3 Themes

Eight themes, presented at the end of Chapter Six, emerged from the findings. The themes were arrived at by synthesising the findings from the two rounds of middle level leader interviews with the eight participants, the interviews with the six principals of these participants, two focus group interviews and document analyses. The conceptual framework acted as a critical analytical lens through which the emergent themes were examined. It provided themes revealed from the extant literature with the research questions seeking to provide possibilities for new and future understandings about the role. The research findings were examined in light of this conceptual framework to arrive at the eight key themes. The themes are linked in Table 7.1 to the research questions.

Table 7.1

Eight Key Themes

Themes	Link to research question
1. The role in action: skills, requirements and preparation for the role	Question 1 Question 2 Question 3 Question 5
2. Professional development and professional learning	Question 1 Question 2 Question 3 Question 4
3. Middle level leaders and Catholic ethos	Question 1 Question 4
4. Managing or leading?	Question 1 Question 2 Question 5
5. Aspirations to further leadership	Question 3 Question 5
6. Differing expectations of middle level leaders	Question 4 Question 5
7. Colleague middle level leaders	Question 2 Question 4
8. Unfulfilled potential in the role	Question 5

Theme 1: The role in action: skills, requirements, qualities and preparation for the role.

The role in action.

Middle level leaders carry out a wide variety of tasks and possess a range of skills and professional qualities. This theme is an over-arching one. It identifies how middle level leaders enact their role as an everyday lived experience and the qualities and skills that they possess in order to do so. It also captures the preparation and training that middle level leaders variously have received or require to fulfil the requirements of the role.

While the role was reported as being complex with multiple facets to it, the findings revealed that the role was largely centred on the management of curriculum delivery which included responsibility for ensuring that syllabuses were taught in accordance with requirements, with programs, assessments and registers being written and completed. The extant literature variously describes the roles and tasks involved in middle leadership, with Brown and Rutherford (1999) supporting the notion that role holders see themselves more as managers of the curriculum than they do as managers of their colleagues. There was clear agreement from all participants about the day-to-day tasks pertaining to paperwork and administration appearing to consume most of the time middle leaders had available to them. This is consistent with Jarvis (2008), who describes the middle level leader role as being dominated by lower order, administrative tasks: “Overall then, it can be concluded that the head of department role undeniably includes many elements of management, such as simple organisational/administrative tasks and the marshalling of resources” (p. 29). Principals in this study suggested that middle level leaders were very good at this aspect of their work and, indeed for some, this constituted the bulk of their work. Bennett et al. (2003) similarly reported from their review of literature that middle level leaders see the effective completion of administration tasks as desired qualities and ones that they are most comfortable with doing.

Skills.

An important part of the role identified in this study was the ability to build and maintain a sense of teamwork among faculty members, echoing Brown and Rutherford’s (1998) argument that teamwork and collegiality were important

elements of the role. Managing and building relationships was seen as being central to this team-building role. The ability to develop quality relationships with all staff members was a key feature of the role, according to the participants. This resonates very closely with the literature, where human relationship skills are emphasised in the role (Bennett et al., 2007; Kerry, 2005; Martin & Williams, 2003).

While middle level leaders expressed a desire to be actively and more directly involved in driving improvements in classroom practice, in reality this rarely occurred. As Hobbs (2006) found, middle level leaders understood that lesson observation was part of their role, but they still did not do it. Those in this study expressed a reluctance to engage in formal lesson observations with some suggesting it was not part of their role. Principals expressed some disappointment that there was not more influence exerted in this area by middle level leaders, though they acknowledged that lack of time was a mitigating factor. On this matter, Wise (2001) has suggested that while middle leaders accept monitoring and lesson observation as part of the role, there was little evidence of it actually taking place:

> The middle managers in both the survey and the case studies indicated their acceptance of the need for monitoring and supervising their team members and gave it a high priority. However, as the case studies found, this does not mean that it actually happens. (p. 340)

Later work by Francis (2007) and De Nobile and Ridden (2014) for example has suggested that developing a culture of lesson observation is now

encouraged. It would seem that in this Catholic school system, there is still not a widespread acceptance or culture of shared classroom practice or of lesson observation for the purposes of improving teaching and learning.

The findings from this study, with respect to the bridging, brokering or conduit role is consistent with the literature (Bennett et al., 2007; Brooks, 2013; Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009): middle level leaders engage in communicating and implementing decisions taken at senior leadership level that affect members of their faculty. Middle level leaders in the study saw themselves as providing that link or bridge between these two groups and acting in an advocacy role for both groups. Principals in the study reinforced this as a feature of the role. However, as a result, middle level leaders reported often feeling caught or trapped in the middle. Again, the literature confirms these findings, with Fitzgerald (2009), Jarvis (2008), Cranston (2006) and Kerry (2005) all variously referring to this challenge as being stuck, caught or becoming the “piggy-in-the-middle”.

Requirements.

Although there was general agreement among participants that some elements of the role had changed and grown, and that technology, changes in society, classroom teaching practice and approaches to parenting have all exerted influence on the role. Some participant middle level leaders contended that their role had not changed over time. Given these societal and educational changes, the contention that the role is largely unchanged, is of concern. It may be that some middle level leaders themselves had not changed, yet their role had; a position posed by one of the principals. Some

middle level leaders also expressed concern about the pressure on them to achieve better examination results and to explain the analysis of these results to senior leaders. While the literature is largely in agreement here (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009) as to what actually happens in the role of middle level leader, there is a recent trend around the requirement of middle level leaders to play a much more central role in whole school leadership and decision-making (Adey, 2000; National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services, 2011). This issue will be further discussed later in this chapter.

This study suggests that many middle level leaders still view themselves primarily as classroom teachers. This is not surprising, given the significant teaching load associated with being a middle level leader. Unfortunately, for some middle level leaders in the study, the interruptions to their teaching as a result of their middle level leader responsibilities adds to their frustration of the experience of the role (Glover & Miller, 1999). Indeed, for many, this frustration sets up tensions as to just what they should prioritise in a long list of expectations on them. For many in this study, strong commitment to their classroom responsibilities often resulted in re-enforcing loyalties that were firmly grounded in the faculty with their colleague teachers. There seemed to be reluctance on behalf of some middle level leaders to act in a supervisory way with their faculty members, as they typically saw them as equals. This reluctance is consistent with the arguments in the literature (Bennett et al., 2007; Poultney, 2007). It is important to note here that principals provided a different perspective on these matters, identifying what they saw as a reluctance of middle level leaders to supervise their staff because they either

did not have the necessary skills to do so or they simply did not want to be seen as anything other than a friend or colleague by teachers in their faculty.

Qualities.

Middle level leaders identified a long list of professional and personal qualities required in their role. These paralleled the literature, with White (2002), for example, suggesting: “The CAMM [Curriculum Area Middle Manager] is a team builder who possesses the interpersonal skills, and who models appropriate behaviours, in order to bring about the desired learning area culture” (p. 9). The middle level leaders in this study emphasised building trust as a key quality required to undertake the role effectively. Interestingly, principals made much less comment in this regard, although they did stress the importance of the capacity to promote faculty harmony and to “keep the peace”. Acting as good role models for their teachers was seen as one way to achieve these goals. Dinham (2007) captures this notion well:

> The HoDS [Heads of Department] have effective interpersonal skills. They have a good way of dealing with students, even the recalcitrant. In this, they are able to distinguish between “the sin and the sinner”. One of their most important attributes is that they serve as role models for others, setting a good example. They model humanity and professionalism, thus exercising both moral and professional leadership. (p. 68)

Leaders in schools are driven by a clear ethical and "moral purpose" (Bezzina, 2012; Burford & Bezzina, 2014; Gleeson & O'Flaherty, 2016; Queensland Education Leadership Institute, 2016). As echoed by the participants in this study, their commitment to role-modelling for others is representative of this guiding ethical and moral imperative.

Preparation.

Few middle level leaders in this study had received any training or preparation prior to taking up the role. This finding aligns closely with the literature in this area, with Weller (2001), Poultney (2007) and Dinham (2007) all reporting that specific training for the role was largely absent. It appears that little has changed since the earlier work of Earley and Fletcher-Campbell (1989), who have found that middle level leaders felt inadequately prepared to take up the role. For the middle level leaders in this study, there was a feeling that they were largely left to their own devices, with many using what their predecessors did as models for either how to engage in the role or conversely, how not to go about the role. Weller (2001) reports similar findings. However, somewhat ironically, the principals in this study, who might be expected to have some influence on providing professional learning for their staff, acknowledged that more support and guidance for middle level leaders would be beneficial. In a recent study on perspectives of leadership development for middle level leaders in New Zealand secondary schools, Cardno and Bassett (2015) have found strong differences between those in executive roles and those who held middle level leader roles regarding leadership development. Cardno and Bassett conclude that there needed to be improved initiatives for the development of middle level leaders, with

expectations clarified. There was acknowledgement from some principals in this study that they had perhaps not fulfilled *their* responsibilities to their middle level leaders in this regard. There is an obvious need for principals to take ownership of the need to better prepare potential middle level leaders for their role.

Theme 2: Professional development and professional learning.

In addition to the preparation and training that middle level leaders would like to engage in prior to their taking up the role, they indicated a belief that they would benefit from targeted professional development and ongoing learning in the role. The middle level leaders in this study did acknowledge the value of the professional development that they had been offered in recent times and expressed a desire for this to continue. There was an emphasis from middle level leaders on expecting the system to provide professional development as opposed to them actively taking charge of, and responsibility for, their own ongoing professional learning. Little expressed understanding or ownership of the nexus between developing their skills in the role and self-identification of the attendant professional learning required to gain these skills was revealed. They displayed a lack of understanding or expectation about sourcing and engaging with their learning at school or on an individual level. Brown et al. (2002) report a similar finding about professional development in both a broad sense, and more particularly for middle level leaders specifically, and note: “There needs to be a ‘paradigm shift’ from the notion that professional development is ‘done to you’ rather than an assumption of responsibility for one’s own development path” (p. 40).

A critical area of identified need by the middle level leaders in this study involved the “human aspects” of their leadership, particularly in dealing with difficult or underperforming staff. Thorpe and Bennett-Powell (2014) in a UK study of middle leaders, have found similar needs being expressed. Middle level leaders here also seemed to have missed out on the opportunity to better develop a range of other leadership skills, a finding evident in the literature (Brown et al., 2002; Rosenfeld et al., 2009). Some in this study had undertaken, or were in the process of undertaking, postgraduate studies. This was reported as highly effective for their professional learning for, and in, the role.

The middle level leaders in this study rarely led or facilitated professional development for their own staff. Whether they did not see it as part of their role or indeed did not have the skills to do so was not clear. This finding is consistent with the literature which echoes that middle level leaders do not consider this part of their role, or they simply did not carry out this role (Bennett et al., 2003; Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989; Weller, 2001). Adey (2000) summarises this well:

> Although there is evidence from this survey that middle managers are adapting to changing role expectations in some aspects of their work, there is no evidence of any increase in their assumption of responsibility for the professional development of their departmental staff. (p. 426)

Mentoring and coaching were seen as valuable professional development activities, with some middle level leaders having worked with informal

mentors who influenced their leadership development in a positive manner. However, there was little personal ownership of, or thoughts of initiating mentoring or networking, again with the expectation being expressed from both principals and middle level leaders that someone else (e.g., the system) should provide these opportunities or programs. In brief, it is clear that neither principals nor system leaders have provided much in the way of formal professional development programs for middle level leaders. Some middle level leaders expressed that they felt a lack of recognition and affirmation in their role as well as, more broadly, considerable isolation. Brooks (2013) has found similar sentiments in her research and notes: “The perception held by some middle leaders that their position was under-valued, suggests the need for greater acknowledgement, recognition and perhaps remuneration of middle leaders” (p. 81).

Theme 3: Middle level leaders and Catholic ethos.

It was clearly evident that the middle level leaders in this study took their responsibility as a leader in a faith-based school seriously. While there was some requirement of a commitment to the ethos of Catholic schooling in the position advertisements examined in the document analyses, middle level leaders were very able and willing to demonstrate their strong support for the essence of Catholic schooling and eloquently described the role they played in fulfilling what they saw as both their obligation and personal commitment in this regard. They readily articulated the ways in which they believed they promoted the values and ethos of Catholic education, and how they lived this out on a daily basis. It was clear that promotion and recognition of the leadership role they played in modelling to others was critically important to

participants in this study. These notions are supported by Lavery (2012) who, though investigating the role of the principal, has suggested that leadership in a Catholic context requires leadership of spirituality and service that is relationship-centred. Lavery (2012) and Branson (2014) have further suggested that this may perhaps be termed as “transcendental leadership” where leaders continually strive to become a better person. Somewhat surprisingly, the principals were far less vocal about these matters. Perhaps they took this as being a tacit aspect of the role for middle level leaders and hence one not requiring specific comment. It is difficult to locate these findings in a wider context as there is very little in the literature that is specific to Catholic schooling and that makes explicit mention of the ethos of Catholic schools and the work of middle level leaders. The demonstrated commitment of the staff to their particular Catholic context was unexpected in the sense that the interview questions did not specifically address this aspect of their leadership. However, middle level leaders spoke openly about their sense of vocation and awareness of the religious dimension of their leadership.

Theme 4: Managing or leading?

Not all participants in this study conceived of their work as *only* management focussed, with some providing examples of leadership activity. This leadership role is somewhat contrary to the findings of other research that reports the realities of the role being mainly managerial in nature (De Nobile & Ridden, 2014; Jarvis, 2008; Kotzur, 2007). Some of the literature points to there being a growing expectation and understanding that middle level leaders will engage in leadership activity, particularly with respect to making contributions to whole school matters (Francis, 2007; Mulford, 2007), despite

a strong theme across many years that the role is concerned with management activity (Weller, 2001).

What is clear from this research study is that middle level leaders understood that they should play a more active role in developing the classroom practice of staff and working directly with them on improving pedagogy. However, they frequently nominated the lack of time available to do anything more than the paperwork and administration aspects of the role as a barrier to achieving this. Principals certainly placed emphasis on this as a key concern for middle level leaders but lamented that it did not happen more frequently. With increased compliance regimes and a host of other changes impacting on education and subsequently middle level leaders, all in leadership positions were feeling time pressures impacting on their roles. In this regard, White (2002) suggests:

> Schools should examine the appropriateness of the amounts of non-teaching time being allocated for CAMMs [Curriculum Area Middle Managers]. Whilst appreciating the realities of funding at a school level, it would appear unreasonable to expect the full potential of the CAMM role in schools to be achieved on the sort of non-teaching allowances currently in use. (p. 12)

Middle level leaders spoke of their work as often being clerical in nature and that much of this could well be completed by administrative staff if they were available, freeing them from some of this routinised work in order to spend more of their time on matters pertaining to leading improvements in student

learning and teaching. Over a decade and a half ago, Glover and Miller (1999) made similar observations in their study with middle level leaders noting: “subject leaders continue to undertake many low-level administrative and managerial roles which could be reorganized and delegated to administrative assistants – e.g., photocopying and filing continue to erode time which might be spent on more developmental work” (p. 348).

Echoing earlier research (Cranston, 2007), some middle level leaders reported working long hours, taking work home for evenings and weekends, as a regular part of the role. The release time of 0.2FTE for the middle level leaders in this study seemed inadequate to allow them to fulfil parts of the role they would like to be concentrating on and that constitute leadership activity, such as lesson observations, collaborative efforts with fellow teachers and leaders as well as developing high quality units of work. The question remains as to whether the lower order, routine tasks were being prioritised because they were easy to complete and were comfortable for middle level leaders, a finding reported by Glover and Miller (1999) earlier. Thorpe and Bennett-Powell (2014) have found that middle level leaders were not comfortable or confident in commenting on or communicating expectations regarding the work of their teaching colleagues, highlighted by this comment:

> How to be accountable for a disparate team and accountable for others was a major need identified by some interviewees including skills in sharing expectations, getting team members to accept responsibility and raising standards through others. Engaging and

> motivating members of staff was another way in which this immediate need emerged through a concern about dealing with failing staff and developing new staff. (p. 55)

In addition to calling for more generous time allocations, which would most likely mean less teaching time, some principals and middle level leaders felt that the role was not well remunerated for the amount of work that it involved. It was suggested that the role would be more attractive and possibly attract higher quality candidates, if these were both improved. There is little discussion in the literature regarding remuneration, apart from the work of Brooks (2013), mentioned previously, where both the remuneration and recognition of middle level leaders needed further examination and acknowledgement, due to the feeling that they were underpaid for the job they were expected to do. White (2002) suggests quite simply that time allocations for middle level leaders need to be revisited if more is to be expected of them.

Middle level leaders in this study reported that their ability to lead depended on the degree to which they felt trusted to do their job and the degree of power or otherwise they felt they had. The literature is mixed in this regard, with respect to the notion of power (Hannay & Ross, 1999) and powerlessness (Jarvis, 2008), authority (Hammond, 2000; Weller, 2001), and autonomy (Hobbs, 2006; Lee & Dimmock, 1999). From this research, it is understood that the autonomy and authority that the participants felt they had was mainly predicated on trust. Many indicated the levels of trust they had built within their faculties and with their senior leaders was high. However,

there were some who reported feeling micro-managed and others who spoke of the limits of their authority in terms of decision-making. This may partially explain the reluctance that middle level leaders expressed regarding supervisory aspects of their role. Local contextual features and the actions of those 'above' them in the school hierarchy tended to dictate the degree to which the participants felt trusted. Perhaps clearer role boundaries would assist in delineating the extent to which middle level leaders had clearer authority to make particular decisions. One focus group member spoke of the "powerlessness" of the role, essentially reiterating the sentiment expressed by Jarvis (2008). The role appears to have little positional power in its own right and Bennett et al. (2003) and Fitzgerald (2009) echo the feelings of some participants who suggested that they had a lack of ability to "get people to do things."

As indicated consistently in this research study, the roles of middle level leaders differed according to the schools in which they worked, the contexts under which their roles were lived out and the individuals who held the roles. These factors together mediated the degree to which middle level leaders acted as managers or leaders. Emphasising that middle level leaders are a highly varied group of individuals, De Nobile and Ridden (2014) note: "Perhaps no matter what one calls them, some will always be middle managers, while others, with or without a title, are consistently middle leaders" (p. 25). Wahlstrom et al. (2010) address this uncertainty around the role and are unequivocal in their call for the role of middle level leader to be "radically redefined" (p. 92), as the role has been reduced to one of

managerial activity instead of one that is central to instruction and improvement.

Theme 5: Aspirations to further leadership.

While the aspiration of middle level leaders to promotion has been largely ignored in the research literature (Turner & Sykes, 2007), it is not surprising to expect that future senior leaders would come from the available pool of middle level leaders (Cranston, 2007). Participants in this research study generally reported a lack of aspiration for further leadership, especially to the principal role, echoing findings from the Catholic education sector in the Archdiocese of Sydney in the early 2000s where aspirants to the principalship, prior to the instigation of a project to address the looming shortages of future leaders, had shrunk (d'Arbon et al., 2002). The middle level leaders saw what principals did and determined this was not for them. Senior leadership was not appealing enough, according to those in the study and most felt they would be unprepared for the role. These feelings align with research of Brooks and Cavanagh (2009), where middle level leaders expressed their reluctance to take on more senior roles because of perceptions around workloads and role responsibilities.

There was some apparent difference of opinion about whether or not the role should produce aspiration for further leadership. Consistent in the observation by Fletcher-Campbell (2003) and d'Arbon et al., (2002), one participant in this study suggested that it was more difficult for women to step up into senior leadership than it was for men and that women often made choices in favour of their family, instead of their career. System leaders and

school principals have a role to play in modelling leadership that is manageable, sustainable, and fulfilling and rewarding to ensure that future quality applicant pools are encouraged. A clearly defined career path, with attendant training and support, would assist in securing high quality candidates as successors to these roles, especially if these roles were demystified (Rhodes & Brundrett, 2009). Of course, as with all levels within a school's structural hierarchy, there will be those middle level leaders who have no desire for further leadership and will be career middle level leaders (Cardno & Bassett, 2015).

Theme 6: Differing expectations of middle level leaders.

The findings of the study reveal that there is a lot expected of middle level leaders, though these expectations are not always clearly spelled out, nor are they necessarily well documented. Weller (2001) reports that documented role descriptions and the lived experience of the role are quite different in some cases. While it is clear that what is expected of a middle leader is dependent on local context (Busher & Harris, 1999), it is interesting to note that from the document analyses and from the interview data, many of the participants and principals were not clear about whether or not their school had a formal role statement for a middle level leader. The role descriptions that were provided in all but one case presented very unclear and superficial articulations of the role. From both the literature and from this research study, the role is often ill-defined and ambiguous in nature, with a sense of "uncertainty as to what the role of the head of department entailed" (Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989, p. 107) and not reflective of the actual work done (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009). Foster (2010) states that the role and the definition of it needs to change if middle level leaders are to lead the

improvement of student outcomes. And, as noted earlier, leadership is only likely to happen if they are provided with the necessary professional development.

Basic administrative expectations of the role appear to be well understood and completed efficiently, yet principals in the study desired more from their middle level leaders. They wanted their middle level leaders to be more actively involved in two main areas: leading quality classroom practice; and making a more active contribution to the building of the school's vision and strategic direction (i.e., participation in school-wide matters). Where principals were critical of their middle level leaders, they expressed disappointment in the lack of engagement of some of them in contributing to the school's strategic direction. There was some expectation that middle level leaders would have an active voice in contributing to the decision-making of the school, but some appeared to be more eager participants than others in this regard. Adey (2000) claims that middle level leaders actually exert little influence over whole-school decision-making and some middle level leaders in this study were critical of their colleagues in the same role with respect to this expectation. However, as Rosenfeld et al. (2009) have found, the usual scenario is one where principals expect that middle level leaders make contributions to whole-school matters, whereas middle level leaders concentrate their work within their faculty.

A key question in this research study centred on the alignment of expectation between middle level leaders and their principals. This study has revealed stark differences in these expectations, with middle level leaders suggesting

that they have a good alignment of expectation about the role but principals in the study did not echo this sentiment. Principals' expectations were centred on leading a team in a strategic manner and making significant contributions to the leadership or management team. There seems to be a lost opportunity for middle level leaders to play a leadership role in curriculum as the current situation for most in this study falls well short of what Francis (2007) believes—that middle level leaders could be instrumental in improving outcomes in schools deemed to be failing.

In addition, Brown, Rutherford, et al. (2000) report perceptions about the role of middle level leaders being very different when viewed by deputy heads compared with the middle level leaders themselves. Deputy Heads reported "the heads of department were categorised as 'lacking charisma', 'lacking contribution to whole school management', 'lacking whole school perspective', 'lacking any history of working closely together'" (Brown, Rutherford, et al., 2000, p. 247). This is consistent with the views of the principals in this study who were, at times, quite critical of the quality of some of their middle level leaders. The apparent tension about role fulfilment requires clearer lines of communication between senior leaders and middle level leaders. Largely, in the first instance, this must commence with the principals in individual schools. The relationship between middle level leaders and their principals therefore seems ripe for further investigation as the role continues to evolve. This notion is supported by the work of Hobbs (2006), who suggests that "the relationship between the leadership team and the middle leaders also appears to be an area requiring review, as again any changes here were felt to be of an evolutionary kind" (p.21).

This uncertainty needs to be seen in a context where the role continues to grow (Rosenfeld et al., 2009) and the role continues to change (Cranston, 2006). From this study, the expectations of middle level leaders can be summed up in six key areas: relationships; leading a team; leadership of classroom practice; curriculum; administration; and contribution to whole school strategic decision-making. These are consistent with the suggestions of Dinham (2007) and Fleming (2014), who provide rich descriptions of the qualities of successful middle level leaders.

From this study and the available literature, there is mounting evidence that the role needs to be reimagined, that is, if middle level leaders are to have a direct impact on student learning, then a reconceptualisation of the role is essential (Rosenfeld, 2008). With clear role boundaries, clear lines of authority and a robust role description relevant to local school context, middle level leaders would be expected to be more confident about the expectations of them to carry out their role with success and a sense of reward.

Theme 7: Colleague middle level leaders.

Commentary about colleague middle level leaders was evident from both the participant and principal groups. At times, this discussion was less than complimentary. Middle level leaders described some of their colleagues as having a lack of initiative, lack of contribution to the middle leader team, lack of whole school profile and being stuck in their role, as well as, at times, engaging in passive resistance to change. Some reported the feeling that their colleagues were preserving the status quo. In reality, for some middle

level leaders, their role is experienced in much the same way as it has been for many years. Principals were forthcoming in noting the difference in the quality of their middle level leaders, with some taking an active role in whole school leadership and working with colleagues to improve teaching and learning, while others simply attended to the day-to-day “box ticking” or “nitty gritty” of the role. The fact that most principals did not see a sound alignment of expectation between themselves and their middle level leaders was telling. This leads to a bigger question of what principals might do when they have staff that are not fulfilling their roles to a satisfactory degree.

From this study, there is an apparent need to develop more rigorous accountability (perhaps through the review of performance appraisal instruments) to ensure that those who hold the role are doing the job that others expect and need them to be doing. The criteria for success in the role could also be revisited so that there are clear markers and expectations for success. Potential applicants for the position would benefit from explicit understandings about the expectations for the role. The notion of role ambiguity and conflict, discussed earlier, arises when expectations differ (Wise, 2001). Selection of future middle level leaders needs to be carefully considered and, according to Gurr and Drsysdale (2013), it is the senior leaders in a school who play an essential part in ensuring that middle level leaders are successful in their roles.

Another discrete but inter-related theme concerning middle level leaders emerged. The two arms of middle level leadership in the Catholic school system in this research study are seen to be pitted against each other in

some ways. There were many comments about the differences in the role of pastoral middle level leadership (year coordinators) and curriculum middle level leadership. It appears that the curriculum middle level leaders, i.e., the participants in this study, felt that their pastoral counterparts received more recognition and accolades for their work at times, and in some schools, enjoyed better conditions (such as their own office and more release time). Perhaps those in pastoral middle level leadership roles require different spaces because of the confidential nature of their work with students and parents. In addition, there is scope for further research here as to the comparability of the complexity (if any) of the work of the two groups of middle level leaders.

The visibility of pastoral leaders at public events gave them a profile that curriculum leaders did not appear to enjoy to the same degree. There was a tacit suggestion from the interview data that the pastoral leaders in this school system appeared to be the “real” middle level leaders with one principal saying that they frequently were more “big picture people.” Despite the dearth of research into this area of middle leadership and contrary to the findings of this study, recent Australian research by Crane and De Nobile (2014) has found that pastoral middle level leaders in their study did not appear to enjoy the same positional authority or worth as curriculum leaders. They note: “We found . . . year coordinators . . . did not appear to have the same value or status as subject coordinators” (p. 88).

Theme 8: Unfulfilled potential in the role.

This theme has emerged as a key finding because of its overarching nature i.e., it cuts across all of the other themes and also represents a synthesis of the other themes. It suggests that there is clearly a "'missed opportunity' for leadership" (Jarvis, 2008, p. 28) in the role. As Weller (2001) has reported, there is the potential for those in the role to be better utilised in terms of their leadership in teaching and learning. These notions resonate closely with the thoughts of the middle level leaders in this study, who felt that they had the potential to do and give more, particularly in terms of pedagogical practices. They reported feeling restrained and at times held back from exerting their leadership potential not only by their principals, but in some cases, also by their colleague middle level leaders.

Some of the middle level leaders in this study felt that their senior leaders were reluctant to distribute leadership to them. They also felt that they were not delegated sufficient authority to make decisions that affected their faculties or to further explore their role. Their potential to lead and model quality teaching and learning was mitigated by the preponderance of paperwork and administration that they had to complete.

Similarly, the principals in this study suggested that their middle level leaders had potential to do more in their roles, particularly when it came to sharing skills, ideas and initiatives as well as modelling quality teaching practices. However, what some principals did concede was that they themselves had a role in supporting and developing their middle level leaders but they had "let them down" in some ways by not taking a more active role in this respect.

On this point, some principals acknowledged that they had a responsibility to help middle level leaders develop and realise their potential in their roles, but they did not do it. One principal went so far as to say that their middle level leaders were “the forgotten leaders”. It is clear that principals have, at times, forgotten their middle level leaders and need to take a more proactive approach in their development. They could do this by distributing appropriate leadership authority to their middle level leaders and removing some of the minutiae of their roles, to allow them to concentrate more readily on teaching and learning.

It is clear from this study that middle level leaders possess untapped potential, and that the role itself has the potential to be conceived of and enacted in different ways. An emerging finding from this study is that distributed leadership (Bendikson et al., 2012) is the key to facilitating the realisation of this underutilised potential. As has been argued by Harris (2013) though, it is the principal’s responsibility to set up the right conditions so that leadership is distributed in effective ways. This provides a challenge and a sobering realisation for some principals that, in the first instance, much of this work needs to be commenced at the level of senior leadership.

7.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided a discussion of the themes that emerged from the findings in relation to the literature on middle level leadership. Some of these themes largely confirmed the extant literature in the field, while others revealed unique understandings of the role as it was experienced by the participants in this study. The conceptual framework was again presented to

frame these themes in the context of both the literature and the research questions posed at the commencement of this study. The final chapter, Chapter Eight, provides conclusions and recommendations as well as addressing the limitations of the study and the possibilities for future research.

Chapter Eight

Conclusions, Recommendations and Future Directions

8.1 Introduction

This final chapter presents conclusions and recommendations from the research study. It highlights some policy and practice implications by proposing a model for middle level leadership from which systems, schools and individuals may draw ideas relevant to their particular school's context and culture. These of course need to be considered within the limitations of the study that have been noted in Chapter Four and summarised later in this chapter. Suggestions for future research are also provided. This qualitative research study has in large part, confirmed much of the earlier research into the area of middle level leadership. It has also identified the potential advantages of taking a distributed leadership approach whereby middle level leaders may be empowered to share in the "real business" of leading learning, together with senior leaders to improve student learning outcomes.

8.2 Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that it is timely and in fact overdue, that the role of middle level leader is reimagined and reconceptualised. This research suggests that not only do the expectations of middle level leaders (by principals, teachers and middle level leaders themselves) need to be reconceived and agreed to, but middle level leaders need to be provided with the necessary support, training and ongoing professional development and learning that is required in order for these expectations to be realised.

Leithwood (2016) contends that the department head has more influence on student learning than the principal does yet there are mitigating circumstances that potentially and often diminish the impact that middle level leaders have in schools. The potential that therefore resides within the position could be much more powerful in improving learning outcomes for students, as middle level leaders exert their influence as subject specialists with particular skills and content knowledge.

This study has found that, at present, middle level leaders are underutilised resources in schools, with a good deal of their work dedicated to lower level administrative tasks. Recent research by Carter (2016) and Leithwood (2016) supports this finding. The potential of middle level leaders, in order to be realised, will require senior leaders in schools to engage in structural and cultural changes if middle level leaders are going to be instrumental in leading teaching and learning. Structural change must also account for the hierarchical systems (Fitzgerald, 2009) that currently pervade most secondary schools in Australia. If the desire is to more actively engage middle level leaders in whole school leadership, then flatter, more inclusive (distributed) models of school leadership need to be explored. Potentially, this has ramifications not just for the organisation of the middle level leadership team, but more broadly, perhaps for all levels of leadership in schools.

Middle level leaders need to be offered the opportunity for professional development and learning in whole school leadership matters. They can then

be expected to demonstrate active membership of strategic teams, working with senior leaders to forge the preferred future for their school, as well as being held accountable for their specific teaching and learning responsibilities at class and whole school level. Senior leaders can be encouraged to distribute leadership (Watson, 2009) in real and authentic ways, with the attendant authority that comes with it if middle level leaders are to make such enhanced contributions to school improvement and strategic planning.

Schools might be better served having their middle level leaders, who are closest to the learning (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006), leading the learning in classrooms in collaborative ways with their teaching colleagues. As the Queensland Education Leadership Institute (2016) suggests, this form of collaborative learning must include middle level leaders working with their teachers to devise lessons, plan, observe each other teaching and then come back together to discuss outcomes. There is a need, evidenced from the outcomes of this study, for middle level leaders to lead this kind of action learning, which at present many are not doing in meaningful ways. Many schools have taken the decision to break down the metaphorical and physical walls that have separated students and practitioners from one another to promote a culture of shared learning. This practice needs to continue to be fostered among all practitioners, but particularly for middle level leaders who can be looked towards to lead and model high quality teaching practices. The fears associated with being monitored or observed and the excuses and arguments surrounding supervision versus observation need to be dealt with and debunked. Then, the professionalism of teachers can produce learning and improvements for all teachers and in turn, students. Merely wishing

change to happen will not make it happen and, as Bennett et al. (2007) have explained, merely demanding a new role for middle level leaders will not make it happen either. There needs to be a commitment from all levels of leadership in the school setting.

In order for middle level leaders to do their job well, and for them to be involved with aspects of the role as outlined above, there is a need to examine the amount of release time provided to them. At present, they are simply too time-poor to be able to achieve any more than they currently do, a fact which was acknowledged by principals in this research study. A new role description would prove beneficial in providing role clarity and role boundaries. If the emphasis of the role is to shift from administration and management to leading curriculum implementation and pedagogical practice, then some of the tasks currently occupying and consuming the time available to middle level leaders can be carried out by other people. If middle level leaders are freed from the strictures of paperwork and data entry then pedagogical, cultural and curriculum change can become the priorities that arise from the structural change.

Below are seven recommendations that are provided to stimulate discussion and action regarding the role of middle level leaders. These recommendations arise from the synthesis of this research and also from the literature that has been explored. The recommendations are linked to the research questions (RQ), draw on the conceptual framework presented in Chapter Two, and respond to the silences and under-researched areas that are seen to exist in middle level leadership, particularly in an Australian

context. Together, they represent a reimagined role for middle level leaders. Practitioners (school leaders) and policy makers (system level leaders) are best placed to determine which recommendations represent priorities for them and for particular school contexts. Some may be attended to more easily than others. Some of the later recommendations would require longer-term planning and implementation, involving change of a significant order. As noted earlier, it is important that the limitations of the research frame consideration of these recommendations. It is expected they may have differing importance in different school contexts.

Recommendation 1 (Linked to RQ1, RQ2 and RQ5)

Reimagine and redefine the role: Engage a distributed leadership model to allow the potential in the role to be fulfilled.

In subscribing to the notion that shared leadership models such as distributed leadership and parallel leadership (Crowther, 2011) are essential for the effective leadership of secondary schools today, where principals cannot be expected to achieve this on their own (Carter, 2016), it is necessary for the leadership capacity of middle level leaders to be built and supported. This can be best achieved by reimagining and clearly redefining the role itself. By engaging in authentic, distributed leadership, middle level leaders would be empowered to take an active leadership role in such things as: curriculum innovation; shared, collaborative classroom practice; and improvement in student learning outcomes. It would also provide middle level leaders with the authority to lead their faculties. In effect, the role as it currently stands would be reconceived.

A reimagined role would actively engage middle level leaders as instructional leaders, working with senior leaders to shape the school improvement agenda. In reimagining the role, the underutilisation of middle level leaders as described by Jarvis (2008), would be attended to, so that the latent potential in the role could be fulfilled.

Once this new role has been clearly articulated, role or position descriptions need to be written so that they comprehensively and accurately reflect the expectations on, and accountabilities of, middle level leaders. This action has the potential to minimise the issues around role ambiguity and role confusion identified in this study and elsewhere. It is recommended that such statements be consistent with the language and terminology of current documents for teachers and leaders developed by AITSL. It may be worthwhile to use the “professional practices” elements of the AITSL principal standard as a structural framework under which the detail of middle level leaders’ roles could be elaborated on. These would need to be nuanced somewhat to suit the needs of the middle level leaders’ role, with the following serving as a possible example:

1. Leading teaching and learning, e.g., curriculum content knowledge
2. Developing self and others, e.g., mentoring and coaching teachers
3. Leading improvement, innovation and change, e.g., pedagogical practice
4. Leading the management of the faculty, e.g., paperwork accountabilities
5. Engaging and working with others, e.g., contribution to whole-school leadership functions

The development of a new role for middle level leaders could potentially be a national one, developed collaboratively among middle level leaders, principals and AITSL. Newly written role descriptions could then be used as a tool to benchmark middle level leader performance against. The role description must be regularly revisited to ensure its contemporaneous use and currency.

There are important implications for principals if the role is reimagined and redefined. From this study and from the wider research it is apparent that principals feel that the role is not being performed in the manner that it potentially could be. Currently, the role is not what principals would like yet they appear to be unable or unwilling to do anything about it. Principals would benefit from some professional learning in how they can better distribute leadership to their middle level leaders, and, in so doing, empower them to lead. It is incumbent on principals to shape the structure of leadership teams in their schools (being cognisant of local needs and contexts), so that middle level leaders have the capacity, skills and training to better realise the role as principals would like it to be performed.

Recommendation 2 (Linked to RQ3 and RQ4)

Strengthen connections between middle level leaders and senior leaders.

This recommendation seeks to empower middle level leaders to do their job and to bring into closer alignment the expectations that principals and role holders have regarding the role. The paradox of the powerlessness and the

powerfulness of middle level leaders, as revealed in the literature (Bennett et al., 2003; Fitzgerald, 2009; Hannay & Ross, 1999; Jarvis, 2008; Turner & Bolam, 1998) and in this study, suggests that the empowerment of middle level leaders is something that needs to be considered.

The relationship between senior leaders, especially the principal, and middle level leaders would benefit from being strengthened such that senior leaders clearly articulate and reinforce agreements that are reached concerning the core purpose that middle level leaders serve (Martin & Williams, 2003). This core purpose should include the school's position on the role that middle level leaders play in contributing to the strategic development and direction of the school. It is incumbent upon senior leaders to model this and to facilitate it. Middle level leaders need their principals to set the example and to communicate readily and easily with them about their work. The distance that is often felt between middle level leaders and senior leaders is a gap that needs to be attended to such that there is greater alignment between middle and senior leaders' understandings.

In empowering middle level leaders it is essential that there is clarity concerning the decision-making powers that middle level leaders hold, or do not hold. Their authority and autonomy needs to be clearly articulated. In turn, the accountabilities of middle level leaders are expected to be clearly spelled out. This would include responsibility for staff performance. Both the wider literature and this research study have revealed different expectations in this domain. Middle level leaders have perhaps suffered from a lack of line authority and that most of them operate from a "colleagues-assisting-

colleagues" model, rather than from any sense of positional power. Principals are ultimately responsible for investing this power in middle level leaders. There are also implications for ensuring that middle level leaders are high quality performers.

Classroom teachers sometimes view middle level leaders as "toothless tigers". If classroom teachers fail to meet deadlines or expectations, it appears there are few consequences unless the issues are passed up the chain of command to a more senior leader. Middle level leaders have little professional 'clout' when it comes to expectations with staff, especially with recalcitrant or difficult classroom teachers. If schools and systems are to continue to delegate (Brown et al., 2000; Brown, Rutherford, et al., 2000; Fitzgerald, 2009; Rosenfeld et al., 2009), then accompanying professional learning and line authority need to form part of this delegation as well. In equal measure, middle level leaders need to be accountable for the exercise of their role.

Recommendation 3 (Linked to RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3)

Improve opportunities for professional development and learning.

The opportunities for professional development and professional learning for current and aspiring middle level leaders can be improved. Professional development must be tailored to individual as well as school and system identified needs. Quality professional development must account for the differing levels of expertise and experiences of middle level leaders. Given that the identification and subsequent training of future senior leaders would

probably come from the middle level leader group, it is essential that those aspiring to senior leadership positions are also adequately trained to take this next career step. From the study, professional development will be most useful when it is delivered on-site and pertains directly to the work of middle level leaders. Identified areas of need for training include:

1. how to conduct difficult conversations with teachers, senior leaders and others;
2. dealing with staff and parent conflict;
3. improving relational aspects of the role;
4. managing unsatisfactory staff performance;
5. practical tips for managing the workload;
6. prioritising and developing good systems for faculty leadership;
7. ongoing formation in spirituality and religious dimensions of leadership for those in faith-based schools; and,
8. the provision of mentoring programs (at local and system levels).

Middle level leaders in this study articulated a desire for further opportunities to engage in networking beyond their school. Not only do they need to be empowered, but they also need to source this for themselves rather than relying on others to do it for them. They therefore need to take greater ownership of, and be more accountable for, their own professional networking and learning, and take more responsibility for the operation of these professional networks.

In tandem with this recommendation, middle level leaders can take greater responsibility for developing the staff in their own schools by providing and

delivering professional development to others. While many in this study did not appear to see this as part of their role, if they are to become leaders of curriculum, then they must be able to pass on this knowledge and use their expertise in building the capacity of others.

Recommendation 4 (Linked to RQ1)

Implement an aspiring middle level leader program.

Aspiring middle level leaders would benefit from some knowledge about the role in order to both promote it and to encourage high quality candidates to nominate for the role to ensure a solid pool of aspirants for further leadership in the future. From the participants in this study, there is limited evidence of aspiring leader programs at this level with the exception of some work that has been carried out in the United Kingdom (Toop, 2012) and in other diocesan jurisdictions. Such a program could lessen or eradicate the “sink or swim” and “learn by osmosis” experience that many middle level leaders from this study reported in their initial period in the role. This reported experience of middle level leaders was echoed in the literature with regard to learning on the job or learning by osmosis (Adey, 2000; Brown, Rutherford, et al., 2000; Turner, 2000). Mentoring or coaching programs for aspiring leaders could provide benefit by linking them with experienced middle level leaders in order to grow their capacity.

Recommendation 5 (Linked to RQ1, RQ3 and RQ5)

Investigate complementary middle level leader positions.

Given the evolution of the role over time and the way in which schools have continued to change, perhaps there are new ways of constructing middle

level leadership teams with complementary positions to support the work of those who have been charged with faculty or subject department leadership. While the divisional structures of high schools are well entrenched and are probably not likely to move away from the faculty as the chief method of delineating a school's organisational structure, there is an opportunity to look at other ways of providing leadership to support and enhance the work of middle level leaders in a curriculum or faculty role in leading learning. Some schools and school systems have introduced roles such as Leaders of Pedagogy, Leaders of Professional Learning and Leaders of Research, as well as data analysis specialists. While some of these roles may be designed as senior leadership positions, the emphasis is still on supporting the work of middle level leaders in driving school and student improvement.

Recommendation 6 (Linked to RQ1, RQ2, RQ3 and RQ5)

Identify support structures for middle level leaders.

Leading teaching and learning in the faculty should be the prime concern of middle level leaders. They need to be given appropriate time to perform as high quality leaders. Therefore, their time allocation needs to be increased for them to concentrate on the leadership activity that is centrally focussed on the reimagined role outlined above. Freeing them up by giving them more time is a first step in facilitating this kind of preferred leadership role. The amount of release time has not increased in decades, yet the research evidence points to a significant increase in workload and an expanded and differing role (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009; Dinham, 2007).

In addition to increasing the time allocation, middle level leaders need to be relieved of some of the lower level administrative tasks that they at present perform that prevent them from engaging in collaborative work centred on teaching and learning with their faculty colleagues. It is time for much of the administrative work such as data entry, record keeping and clerical tasks to be handed to capable administration staff. In some cases, middle level leaders have to learn to let go of some of the tasks that have characterised their work in the past.

Recommendation 7 (Linked to RQ1 and RQ4)

Redefine the purpose and conduct of meeting structures.

The purpose and conduct of meetings need to be examined to evaluate their worth and productivity. Faculty meeting and middle level leader team meetings must be quarantined for the purpose of further developing the professional skills of teachers and middle level leaders. Too often these meetings have the potential to become lower order, administrative gatherings where the minutiae of day-to-day school life are discussed. At times, much of this can be dealt with via e-mail or memo. Meetings must be a forum for the exchange of ideas directly related to classroom practice as well as the collaborative development and evaluation of teaching programs, assessment instruments and feedback mechanisms for students. Faculty meetings may well be dismantled altogether in favour of a cross-disciplinary approach where teachers come together to share ideas, skills and knowledge. This will change be dependent on expressed needs at the local level.

The adoption of a professional learning community approach to meeting time (as espoused by Dufour & Fullan, 2013) may prove beneficial. Middle level leader team meetings likewise must be focused on whole school matters with active contributions sought and expected from middle level leaders. Having a true voice in shaping the future of the school relies heavily on senior leaders both allowing and expecting middle level leaders to step up to this kind of leadership role. Meeting time must be devoted to professional learning and be firmly centred on improving outcomes for students.

8.3 Nomenclature

The use of the term middle level leader in this thesis has been a deliberate one. Until fairly recently educationalists have written about “management” (Eacott, 2013) in referring to those holding head of department roles as middle managers. Indeed, some schools still use this nomenclature. While it is acknowledged that there are necessary elements of both management and administration in leadership roles at all levels, what is required more than ever is *leadership*. People holding the role of middle level leader in secondary schools are being asked to lead: curriculum development and review; exemplary classroom learning and engagement; quality assessment; and cycles of feedback and evaluation. Students today require schools to provide them with relevant, real-world learning opportunities that prepare them for a complex world. Managers and management alone will not realise this.

Nomenclature is therefore important. As some school systems have already done some time ago, nomenclature pertaining to those who lead in the

middle needs to be re-examined. Clearly, using terminology alone changes nothing, but it does signal an important message about the role. In an English study, Hobbs (2006) notes that very few faculty heads in the case study school she researched were comfortable with the term middle leader. The participants did not feel like middle leaders and also did not feel that the leadership team treated them as such. Those holding middle level leadership roles are required to fulfil a variety of roles. They need to take a front-line approach to working with staff to ensure that teaching and learning is of high quality for all. Notwithstanding, the recent work of Eacott (2013) is noted, with respect to his views on the propensity of educational leadership to embrace notions of "populous faddism". Eacott argues that the use of the term 'leadership' may well be succumbing to the "rapidity of changes in the fashions of rhetoric" (p. 113).

It is also noted that the term middle level leader can also however be limiting. For those experienced middle level leaders who have little desire for further promotion the title can potentially be seen as demeaning of their leadership in that they are seen as only occupying a role in the "middle". Frank, a principal in this research study, raised concern about nomenclature:

> *[I'd like] the word middle taken out of it because I don't think they are middle. It's sort of condescending in some ways to say you're only a middle manager. They're leaders of their area of the school.*

Fitzgerald (2009) suggests that instead of adopting hierarchical position titles, pedagogical titles are embraced, thereby potentially alleviating the concern of

feeling left “in the middle.” Titles such as “leader of learning” or similar could prove helpful.

Regardless of the titles given to middle level leaders, they provide leadership of the learning that is steeped in their experience as classroom practitioners. They occupy a key position in schools and “they are in a unique position of being potentially the most influential people in a well-organised secondary school if their role is properly defined and their responsibilities clearly delineated” (Weller, 2001, p. 73).

8.4 A Model of Effective Middle Level Leadership

Middle level leaders hold complex, multi-faceted and demanding roles. A model of effective middle level leadership is proposed in Figure 8.1 as a way of describing the different leadership capabilities, skills, qualities and dispositions that a highly effective middle level leader might possess. These domains flow in and out of one another to create a dynamic whole. The model sets out the possibilities and potential for the role. Of course, these need to be considered and framed in each school’s context, culture and need.

The essence of this model centres on the notion that effective middle level leadership is built on positive, collegial and professional relationships. Middle level leaders are required to form relationships with a host of stakeholders in the school and local community environment. From these relationships, all of the other domains of the middle level leadership position are interconnected.

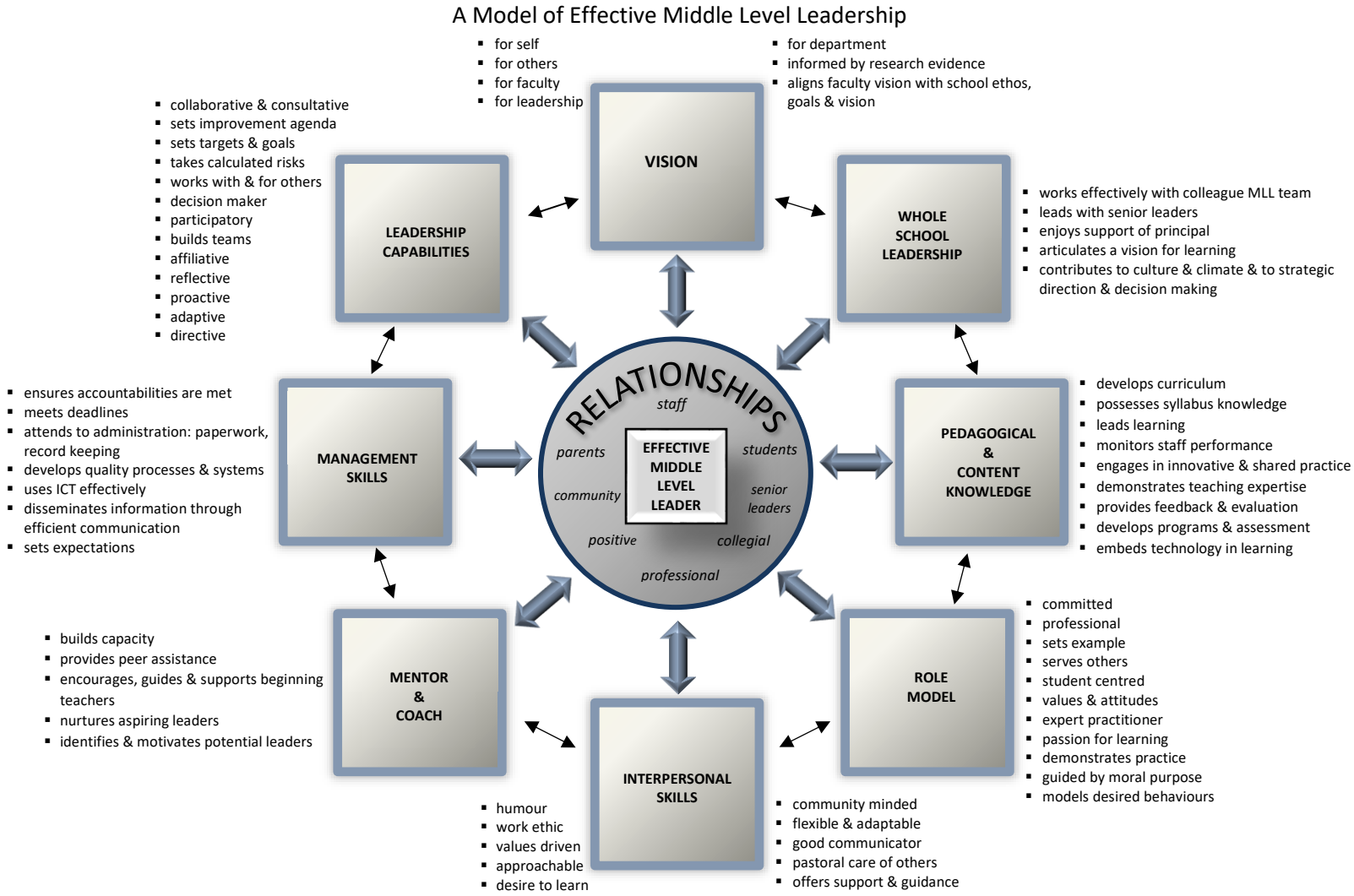

Figure 8.1 *Middle Level Leaders: Capabilities, Skills, Qualities and Dispositions*

The remaining domains of the model are explained briefly:

Interpersonal: Leadership requires role holders to possess highly developed interpersonal skills, with a keen knowledge of the human condition. Interpersonal skills are inclusive of all the skills one would expect from a competent leader. The skills must be extended to parents, staff and students, as well as to community members. Middle level leaders exert pastoral care for others and in Catholic schools, in the context of the traditions and values espoused by the Catholic Church.

Mentor and coach: Middle level leaders act as both coach and mentor, not only for beginning teachers, but also for all who seek their support and wisdom. In turn, middle level leaders are influenced by others as they often seek out their own mentor to guide them in their leadership.

Pedagogical and content knowledge: Middle level leaders demonstrate a working knowledge of current syllabus documents, curriculum development and assessment programs, and know how to use feedback effectively, evaluate learning outcomes and work collegially with staff on planning units of work. Their expertise as a classroom teacher will be obvious and demonstrable to others. They will be highly effective practitioners who share their knowledge and skills through team teaching, lesson observation and the ongoing professional learning of others. They monitor staff performance as an integral part of their role.

Role model: Middle level leaders are called to be a role model for others. This requires more than modelling their teaching skill-set. It overlaps with the values and attitudes they possess as well as a work ethic that sets the example with, and for all others, in the school community. Their role modelling is characterised by competence, compassion and care. Their passion for learning and teaching will also be obvious to all. Effective middle level leaders are able to share and demonstrate their teaching expertise with others. They are guided by moral purpose and strive for authentic learning, using personal values that are aligned with the professional organisation.

Whole-school leadership: Middle level leaders make an active contribution to the strategic direction and future of the school. Their principals will support this level of involvement, and provide the necessary skills and training so that they are able to maximise their involvement at this level. Part of this domain includes building the desired culture and climate of the school, together with the senior leadership team. Effective middle level leaders will be able to articulate a vision for learning.

Vision: Effective middle level leaders possess a vision for leadership, as well as a vision for learning. They must have a vision for their own faculty which, in turn, needs to be aligned with, and informed by, the vision, ethos and goals of the whole school. Effective middle level leaders will also have a vision for their own leadership and a vision for members of their faculty. Middle level leaders need to be encouraged and prepared to take calculated risks with their leadership, informed by research and evidence.

Leadership capacity: This domain pertains to those skills and actions that middle level leaders engage with in the day-to-day living out of their role. Middle level leaders lead in a variety of ways that are appropriate to the situation. At times, middle level leaders will be directive in their leadership approach, while at many other times their leadership will be collaborative and participative, encouraging the leadership building of others and the building of quality, high-functioning teams. Quality leadership is affiliative and works in the service of others. Effective leaders set and implement an appropriate improvement agenda and hold themselves and others accountable for it. They are proactive in their work and set targets that are challenging yet achievable. Effective leaders reflect on their work and adapt to the situation at hand.

Management skills: Effective leaders are also required to be good managers. Sound management systems include the ability to meet deadlines; put quality systems and procedures in place; complete paperwork and record keeping; meet accountabilities; employ sound communication mechanisms; and, use information and communication technologies effectively.

8.5 Limitations

The limitations of the study were discussed in some detail in Chapter Four and are summarised again here. This qualitative study of middle level leadership conducted in one regional Catholic diocese in NSW has some obvious limitations. It was not the purpose of this study to attempt to provide generalisability about the role but rather to give some insights into the lived

experience of middle level leaders in one system of Catholic secondary schools. The emphasis was on exploring the role of middle level leaders in order to better understand the role in NSW Catholic secondary schools. Given the sample size, there are no claims that the findings (and hence the recommendations) can be generalised across middle level leaders in all schools in NSW or, more broadly, Australian schools. However, there are some strong similarities between these findings and the wider research literature such that the learnings here do make an important contribution to what has been a limited area of educational leadership research.

8.6 Future Research

This research has concentrated on schools in the Catholic sector and has explored the work of curriculum middle level leaders. One of the research questions explored the ways in which the expectations of principals aligned with those holding the role. Future research may explore what classroom teachers and other staff in schools expect of their middle level leaders. The voice of students is also absent from this research study. It would be interesting to note what they would have to say about the influence that middle level leaders may have on students' classroom learning experiences. The research literature suggests that there is little empirical evidence of the influence of middle level leaders on student learning (Bennett et al., 2003).

Given the findings from this research, a comparison between the roles of middle level leaders involved in pastoral or year level leadership and curriculum leaders may also prove beneficial additions to the research literature. Again, this is an under-researched area, with Crane and De Nobile

(2014) offering this comment: “clearly, researchers cannot afford to ignore year coordinators. Yet they seem to have” (p. 81). Additionally, further research into classroom teachers’ views and their aspirations to middle level leadership may prove instructional in better understanding how they might be prepared to take up their role.

The middle level leaders in this research study had little formal role in providing professional development for their colleagues, nor did they appear to play much of a role beyond their own school community. Research examining the reasons why middle level leaders do not play more of a role in these two areas could be explored. As Dinham (2002, as cited in Dinham, 2007) comments: “HoDs [Heads of Department] tend to be neither recognised nor utilised to any great degree outside their school and are, in some respects, ‘hidden treasures’” (p. 77).

One surprising finding from this research study was the degree to which middle level leaders in Catholic schools were committed to, and able to articulate, the contribution they made to the Catholic ethos of the school. The sense of vocation and the obligation these middle level leaders felt about their work in a Catholic context was clearly evident. There is very little research evidence available about how teachers in Catholic schools view their work in middle leadership in this domain. There is much scope for further research here.

8.7 Thesis Summary

This research has investigated the middle level leadership role in NSW Catholic secondary schools in one regional diocesan school system and used a case study approach. The aim was to learn more about the lived experience of the role, and in so doing, provide some better understandings about the role. This research study has explored the role and has aimed to provide a current Australian snapshot to add to the body of knowledge about this key role in secondary schools. A conceptual framework has been provided to illustrate the silences and those under-researched areas in the research literature, and how this study will inform future understanding for the role.

It is clear from this study that there is a need to better frame the role, subject to its local context, with clear role expectations, boundaries and authority. This would be best served by engaging in a distributed leadership approach, where middle level leaders are empowered to lead the learning and to make contributions to leadership in the school more generally. There appears to be unfulfilled potential in the role. It is incumbent on senior leaders to tap into this potential so that both senior leader groups and middle level leaders can glean more from the role to benefit schools in general, and students specifically.

The expectations of middle level leaders, as expressed by principals and middle level leaders themselves, are generally not well aligned. An outcome of this study is a series of seven recommendations to bring about a re-imagination of the role. These recommendations respond to the literature and

the findings of this study in strengthening the role to make the essential aspects of the leadership of curriculum and pedagogical classroom practice, more prominently featured. The model of effective middle level leadership has proposed a series of domains for leadership at this level. It is illustrative of the potential for the role with its attendant complexity and demands.

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Locked Bag 1307 Launceston
Tasmania 7250 Australia
Phone (03) 6324 3265 Fax (03) 6324 3048
education.enquiries@utas.edu.au
www.utas.edu.au/education

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Appendix A Letter of Request to School Principals

15 July 2013

[redacted]
Principal
[redacted]
[redacted]

Dear [redacted]

I am writing to request your permission to conduct a research study in your school in partial fulfilment of my Doctor of Education degree through the University of Tasmania. The study will involve two in-depth face to face interviews with middle level leaders (Studies Coordinators) of approximately 60 minutes duration, as well as one face to face interview with you regarding the work, roles and expectations of middle level leaders in NSW Catholic Secondary schools. Additional middle level leaders will be selected during the course of the year to participate in a focus group session, again lasting for approximately 60 minutes. Ideally, at least two middle level leaders from each school will be involved in the study to further promote the anonymity of participants. Participants in the study will not be named and their identity will not be revealed in the study. All data collected will be treated in a confidential manner. Whilst every effort will be made to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants, this cannot be guaranteed. Principals and middle level leaders who participate in the study will be asked to keep all discussions confidential and in order to promote the anonymity of all participants, to not reveal the identity of any participants involved should they become known to another party.

I have attached for your perusal, **an information sheet** outlining more detail about my proposed study. I would be pleased if you would contact me by telephone on ph. [redacted] or via email: craig.wattam@[redacted] to signal your approval for me to make approaches to your middle level leaders for possible inclusion in the study as well as signalling your interest in being involved. If you are interested in participating in this study **please respond to me by Friday 26 July 2013.**

My study has the approval of the Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee as well as the approval of the Catholic Schools Office through the Director of Schools, [redacted]. The ethics reference number for this study is H0013078.

If you have any questions or queries regarding my proposed study, then please feel free to contact my supervisors at the University of Tasmania, Professor Neil Cranston on ph (03) or Dr Jeanne Allen on ph (03)

Please note that neither you nor your middle level leaders are under any obligation to agree to this request to conduct the study involving members of your school community. Principals should not exert any pressure for their middle level leaders to be involved in the study. If you should choose to decline this invitation there will be no consequences that arise from this choice and your decision will be accepted and respected.

With thanks

Craig Wattam

Locked Bag 1307 Launceston
Tasmania 7250 Australia
Phone (03) 6324 3265 Fax (03) 6324 3048
education.enquiries@utas.edu.au
www.utas.edu.au/education

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Appendix B Letter of Invitation to Middle Level Leaders

Date

Dear Colleague

I am writing to invite you to participate in the research study that I am conducting in partial fulfilment of a Doctor of Education degree with the University of Tasmania. The study will involve the participation of principals and six middle level leaders (Studies Coordinators) in the diocese of [redacted]. The principals and six middle level leaders will be involved in interviews conducted by me. An additional, eight middle level leaders will be involved in focus group discussions. If you agree to be involved in the study, your participation will involve the following:

- Participation in two in-depth face to face interviews with middle level leaders (Studies Coordinators) of approximately 60 minutes duration,
- The additional middle level leaders will be selected during the course of the year to participate in a focus group session, again lasting for approximately 60 minutes.

Participants in the study will not be named and their identity will not be revealed in the study. All data collected will be treated in a confidential manner. Ideally, at least two middle level leaders from each school will be involved in the study to further promote the anonymity of participants. Whilst every effort will be made to protect your anonymity and confidentiality, this cannot be guaranteed, particularly for those participating in the focus group interviews. For your further information, one face to face interview will be conducted by the researcher with your principal regarding the work, roles and expectations of middle level leaders in NSW Catholic Secondary schools. The information that you provide will not be shared with your principal. Similarly, the information that your principal provides will not be shared with you in an attempt to promote the confidentiality and anonymity of both parties.

The **attached information sheet** provides a more detailed explanation of my study. I would be pleased if you would read this information. Please feel free to telephone (ph [redacted]) or email me (craig.wattam@[redacted]) if you would like to discuss this further. If you are interested in participating in this study **please respond to me by _____ 2013.**

Your school principal has already given approval for me to approach you to seek your interest in participating in this study. My study has the approval of the Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee as well as the approval of the Catholic Schools Office through the Director of Schools, Mr [redacted]. The ethics reference number for this study is H0013078.

If you have any questions or queries regarding my proposed study, then please feel free to contact my supervisors at the University of Tasmania, Professor Neil Cranston on ph (03) or Dr Jeanne Allen on ph (03) .

Please note that you are not under any obligation to agree to this request to participate in this study. If you should choose to decline this invitation there will be no consequences that arise from this choice and your decision will be accepted and respected.

With thanks

Yours sincerely

Craig Wattam

Locked Bag 1307 Launceston
Tasmania 7250 Australia
Phone (03) 6324 3265 Fax (03) 6324 3048
education.enquiries@utas.edu.au
www.utas.edu.au/education

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Appendix C Participant Information Sheet

Understanding the role of the middle level leader in New South Wales Catholic secondary schools

This form is for the information of principals and middle level leaders in selected [redacted] Catholic schools.

Invitation

You are invited to participate in a research study into the role of middle level leaders ("[redacted]" as termed in the [redacted] diocese) in secondary schools through an examination of what the role consists of, perceptions of the role by middle level leaders and their principals and the evolution and changes to the role. The study is being conducted by Mr Craig Wattam, a student at the University of Tasmania. This study is being conducted in partial fulfilment of a Doctor of Education degree for Craig Wattam under the supervision of Professor Neil Cranston and Dr Jeanne Allen.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of the study is to seek insight into the lived experience of middle level leaders in Catholic secondary schools. The research aims to tell the stories of a number of middle level leaders to provide an understanding of the role, the demands and expectations of the role and to examine the degree of alignment between those holding the role and their principals.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You are eligible to participate in this study because you are either a) a principal of a secondary school or b) a middle level leader (i.e. in this case a [redacted]) in a Catholic school. The study will consist of in-depth interviews on two occasions with six middle level leaders from Catholic schools in the [redacted] diocese. The principals of these six middle level leaders will also be interviewed on one occasion. A number of additional middle level leaders will also be invited to participate in the study through their involvement in focus group discussions. The focus group

discussions will involve fourteen additional middle level leaders and they will take place following the individual, in-depth interviews with middle level leaders. This group will add further depth to the data and the research and will be used to follow-up issues identified in the interviews. Ideally, at least two middle level leaders from each school will be involved to further promote the anonymity of participants. The opinions of these middle level leaders will be sought via a group discussion process. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you should choose not to participate in this study then there are no consequences that will arise from this choice and your decision to decline to be involved will be respected. If at any stage you should choose to discontinue your involvement in the study then you may do so without providing an explanation.

What will I be asked to do?

The study involves six middle level leaders and their principals in a series of face to face interviews conducted by Craig Wattam to examine the role of the middle level leader in Catholic secondary schools. During the face to face interview you will be asked about how you perceive the role of middle level leader in Catholic secondary schools: what the expectations of the role are, what the daily lived experience is, what constitutes the role and how the role is evolving or changing. In addition, a further fourteen middle level leaders will be split into two discrete focus groups for follow-up discussion. The focus group sessions will be approximately sixty minutes in duration. The focus group discussions will allow the researcher to follow-up on any issues raised in the interviews as well as allowing a further set of voices to be heard.

Participants will be asked to do the following:

1. Principals will participate in one individual interview that will last approximately 60 minutes. With individual participant permission, the interview will be audio recorded and you will have an opportunity to review and correct a transcript of this interview.

2. Middle level leaders (where their principals have consented to also be involved in the research) will participate in two individual, face to face interviews. Each interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will be conducted some months apart. The second interview will act as a follow-up to the first interview and will check for clarification, for further insights to be discussed and for the participant to provide further information about their role as a middle level leader. With individual participant permission, the interviews will be audio recorded and you will have an opportunity to review and correct a transcript of each interview.

3. Middle level leaders will participate in a focus group session with additional middle level leader participants from the diocese. This session will involve open-ended group discussion to provide further

information about the role of middle level leaders and their work. The focus group discussions will be conducted following the conduct of the individual interviews. There will be seven participants in each focus group. The focus groups will also be face to face interactions. The focus groups will be audio-recorded.

4. Keep the contents of any discussion confidential so as to promote the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants.

Every face to face interview and focus group will be treated in a confidential manner and your name will not be used in any publication arising out of the research. Whilst every effort will be made to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, this cannot be guaranteed. All of the research will be kept in a locked cabinet in the office of the researcher.

Please note that whilst Craig Wattam will be conducting the research study, he will not be able to use this information in any way that pertains to your employment with the diocese of [redacted]. The use of the information gleaned for the study will be for the purposes of the research with the University of Tasmania only.

Are there any possible benefits from participation in this study?

It is possible that the thesis may provide some new insights into the role of middle level leader secondary schools. These insights may be useful for middle level leaders themselves in understanding the lived experience of other colleagues who share the same role. Providing a clear understanding of the role of middle level leaders in Catholic secondary schools and their lived experience in the role and the degree to which this experience matches the expectations that leaders hold for those carrying out the role may also prove to be beneficial for school leaders and system leaders. The research will provide a current snapshot of what it is that middle level leaders actually do in their role. The case studies will provide detailed stories of how the role has evolved over time, giving personal voice to those in the role.

Are there any possible risks from participation in this study?

There are no specific risks anticipated with participation in this study. However, should any participant become distressed as a result of participation in the study then confidential counselling support is available to all employees in the diocese through [redacted]. This counselling service is available by ringing [redacted].

What if I change my mind during or after the study?

Participants are free to withdraw at any time, and can do so without penalty and without providing an explanation. Any data provided up until the time of

withdrawal will be used anonymously. Participants will not be able to be identified in the research report.

What will happen to the information when this study is over?

The raw data will be kept in a secure, locked cabinet in the researcher's office, for five years following completion of the study. Data will be stored in electronic files accessed via a password protected computer and on CD-ROM. All electronic data will also be kept in a secure, locked cabinet for five years. After this time, all data will be destroyed by (secure) shredding. All data will be treated in a confidential manner. All participants in focus group discussions will be requested to keep the conversation confidential, however this cannot be guaranteed. A report of findings will be made available to any participants who request it. Requests for a copy of the report can be made by contacting the researcher via telephone on [redacted] or via emailing craig.wattam@[redacted].

What if I have questions about this study?

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this study please feel free to contact either Mr Craig Wattam at the Catholic Schools Office ph. [redacted] or Professor Neil Cranston ph. (03) 6226 7404 or Dr Jeanne Allen (03) at the University of Tasmania.

This study has been approved by the Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have concerns or complaints about the conduct of this study, please contact the Executive Officer of the HREC (Tasmania) Network on (03) 6226 7479 or email human.ethics@utas.edu.au. The Executive Officer is the person nominated to receive complaints from research participants. Please quote ethics reference number H0013078.

Thank you for taking time to consider this study. If you wish to participate please contact me in the first instance via email on: craig.wattam@[redacted] or telephone me on [redacted]. A written consent form will then be issued to you to read and sign. This information sheet is for you to keep.

Locked Bag 1307 Launceston
Tasmania 7250 Australia
Phone (03) 6324 3265 Fax (03) 6324 3048
education.enquiries@utas.edu.au
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Appendix D1 Participant Consent Form

Understanding the role of the middle level leader in New South Wales Catholic secondary schools

This form is for the information of principals and middle level leaders participating in interviews in selected [redacted] Catholic schools

1. I agree to take part in the research study named above.
2. I have read and understood the Information Sheet for this study.
3. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.
4. I understand that the study involves interview(s) with the researcher. These interviews will be audio recorded. Once transcribed, participants will have an opportunity to review. Each interview will be approximately 60 minutes in duration.
5. I understand that participation involves no foreseeable risk(s).
6. I understand that all research data will be securely stored in the researcher's office for five years from the publication of the study results, and will then be destroyed unless I give permission for my data to be archived.

   I agree to have my study data archived.

   Yes ☐ No ☐
7. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
8. I understand that the researcher will maintain confidentiality and that any information I supply to the researcher will be used only for the purposes of the research. Whilst every effort will be made to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants in the focus group interview, the nature of the group dynamic dictates that this cannot be guaranteed.
9. I understand that I will not be able to be identified as a participant in any reports or publications emanating from the study.

10. I understand that both school principals and middle level leaders will be involved in the study and will be interviewed as part of the study. In an effort to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants, the information that is provided will not be shared with any other party. Similarly, the information others provide will not be shared with me in any way.
11. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without any effect or penalty.
12. I understand that I will not be able to withdraw my data after participation in the interview process.

Participant's name:

_____

Participant's signature:

_____

Date:

_____

Statement by Investigator

☐ I have explained the project and the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation.

If the Investigator has not had an opportunity to talk to participants prior to them participating, the following must be ticked.

☐ The participant has received the Information Sheet where my details have been provided so participants have had the opportunity to contact me prior to consenting to participate in this project.

Investigator's name:

_____

Investigator's signature:

_____

Date:

_____

Locked Bag 1307 Launceston
Tasmania 7250 Australia
Phone (03) 6324 3265 Fax (03) 6324 3048
education.enquiries@utas.edu.au
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Appendix D2 Participant Consent Form

Understanding the role of the middle level leader in New South Wales Catholic secondary schools

This form is for the information of middle level leaders participating in focus group discussions in selected [redacted] Catholic schools

1. I agree to take part in the research study named above.
2. I have read and understood the Information Sheet for this study.
3. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.
4. I understand that the study involves participation in a focus group with the researcher and other selected middle level leaders. This focus group will be audio recorded. Once transcribed, participants will have an opportunity to review. Each focus group will be approximately 60 minutes in duration.
5. I understand that participation involves no foreseeable risk(s).
6. I understand that all research data will be securely stored in the researcher's office for five years from the publication of the study results, and will then be destroyed unless I give permission for my data to be archived.

   I agree to have my study data archived.

   Yes ☐ No ☐
7. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
8. I understand that the researcher will maintain confidentiality and that any information I supply to the researcher will be used only for the purposes of the research. Whilst every effort will be made to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants in the focus group interview, the nature of the group dynamic dictates that this cannot be guaranteed.

9. I understand that my school principal will also be involved in the study and will be interviewed as part of the study. In an effort to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants, the information that my principal provides will not be shared with me in any way. Similarly, the information I provide will not be shared with my principal in any way.
10. I understand that I will not be able to be identified as a participant in any reports or publications emanating from the study.
11. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without any effect or penalty.
12. I understand that I will not be able to withdraw my data after participation in the focus group process.

Participant's name:

_____

Participant's signature:

_____

Date:

_____

Statement by Investigator

☐ I have explained the project and the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation.

If the Investigator has not had an opportunity to talk to participants prior to them participating, the following must be ticked.

☐ The participant has received the Information Sheet where my details have been provided so participants have had the opportunity to contact me prior to consenting to participate in this project.

Investigator's name:

_____

Investigator's signature:

_____

Date:

_____

Locked Bag 1307 Launceston
Tasmania 7250 Australia
Phone (03) 6324 3265 Fax (03) 6324 3048
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Appendix E Final Letter of Invitation to Middle Level Leaders and Principals

Date

Dear Colleague

Thank you for responding to my letter of invitation to participate in the research study that I am conducting in partial fulfilment of a Doctor of Education degree with the University of Tasmania. I am pleased that you are willing to be involved in this work. As previously stated, my study will involve the participation of principals and six middle level leaders ([redacted]) in the diocese of [redacted]. The principals and six middle level leaders will be involved in interviews conducted by me. An additional fourteen middle level leaders will be involved in focus group discussions. The study will requires participation in two in-depth face to face interviews with middle level leaders ([redacted]) of approximately 60 minutes duration, as well as one face to face interview with your principal regarding the work, roles and expectations of middle level leaders in NSW Catholic Secondary schools. The additional middle level leaders will be selected during the course of the year to participate in a focus group session, again lasting for approximately 60 minutes.

Please be assured that participants in the study will not be named and their identity will not be revealed in the study. All data collected will be treated in a confidential manner. Whilst every effort will be made to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, this cannot be guaranteed particularly for those who choose to participate in the focus group interviews, given the nature of a group dynamic. The information that you provide will not be shared with other parties e.g. if you are a middle level leader, your information will not be shared with your principal. Similarly, the information that principals provide will not be shared with you in an attempt to promote the confidentiality and anonymity of both parties.

I ask that you complete and return the **attached consent form** to me by _____ 2013. Please feel free to telephone (ph [redacted]) or email me (craig.wattam@[redacted]) if you have any questions. If you would like to discuss my proposed study someone other than me, then please feel free to contact my supervisors at the University of Tasmania, Professor Neil Cranston on ph (03) or Dr Jeanne Allen on ph (03)

Please note that you are not under any obligation to participate in this study. If you should choose to decline this invitation or withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no consequences that arise from this choice and your decision will be accepted and respected.

With thanks

Yours sincerely

Craig Wattam

Appendix F Focus Groups Interview Protocol

October 2014

1. The word “leadership” is used freely and frequently in education circles. From the research I have conducted thus far, I suspect that there are different understandings of what this word actually means in a school context. What do you understand by the word leadership, and to what extent do you feel that as a subject coordinator/KLA coordinator in a school, you are a leader?

2. It appears from my study that there are some key or essential features of what middle level leaders do. What, for you, are the key aspects of your role? (prompt if needed: The role has a deal of administration and management in it. Which administrative/paperwork tasks if any, do you think you could delegate to someone else? Are things like S&S, programming, assessment and the like all necessary evils? Who would that be? Could support staff/clerical staff take on some of these roles?)

3. There appears to be some evidence that whilst some middle level leaders say they would like more of a leadership role, in fact, some are quite happy with more of an administrative/management role. This might be a matter of expertise of skill or even interest. Do you have any thoughts on this?

4. From my study there seems to be some variety of opinion expressed around the classroom practice of the teachers under the supervision of the middle level leader. Could you comment on your role in this respect? (prompt: to what degree do you do influence the classroom practice of your staff? What purpose do you think teaching rounds/walk-throughs and the like, serve?)

5. If middle level leaders were required to “step up” to a more enhanced leadership role, what implications does this have for their professional learning? What might the professional learning priorities be? (prompt: if there was more professional development opportunity – what would you avail yourself of? What would you like your principal to provide to you?)

Locked Bag 1307 Launceston
Tasmania 7250 Australia
Phone (03) 6324 3265 Fax (03) 6324 3048
education.enquiries@utas.edu.au
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Appendix G Interview Schedule and Questions for Middle Level Leaders

Understanding the role of the middle level leader in New South Wales Catholic secondary schools

Interview Schedule for middle level leaders
Researcher/interviewer: Craig Wattam
Interviewee: _____ Gender: ____ Participant No: ____
Date: _____
Interview starting time: _____
Interview finishing time: _____
Interview duration: _____
Venue: _____

Guiding Interview Questions for middle level leaders

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. As you realise from the information sheet you have received, I am conducting research into the role of middle level leaders in Catholic schools in NSW. I am particularly interested in understanding the lived experience of the role both from the point of view of those holding the role and also from the viewpoint of the principals of the schools where participating middle level leaders work. The interview today will last approximately 60 minutes. Is that ok with you?

I will be taking notes and making an audio recording of the interview. Do you agree with me doing this?

Introduction

As we discussed on the phone, during this interview I would like to ask you some questions relating to your experience and understanding of the role of middle level leader. I will be asking you to talk to me about your understanding of the role and the expectations that you see for the role of middle level leader in Catholic secondary schools.

There are a number of questions. Please feel free to provide as much detail as you wish in your answers. If you are unclear about the meaning of any question, please do not hesitate to ask for clarification.

I will be making notes as you speak and, occasionally I may ask that you pause whilst I jot down particular comments that you make. Are you happy for me to do this?

Once we have worked our way through the questions, there will be an opportunity for you to add any further information and insights that you may have about the middle level leadership role in schools. In order to promote the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants, do you agree to keep the contents of our discussion today confidential?

Are you comfortable and ready for me to commence? There are three broad categories that I'd like to discuss today. The first group of questions is about your experience in the role.

Group 1 questions: the interviewee's experience in the role

1. How long have you been in the position of middle level leader?
2. What KLA or group of subjects are you responsible for leading?
3. How long have been at this school?
4. Could you please tell me which of the following age groups you fit into:

   ☐ 22-30 years ☐ 31-40 years ☐ 41-50 years

   ☐ 51-60 years ☐ 61+ years
5. How do you see your role as a middle level leader in a Catholic secondary school?
6. What do you actually do in your role?
7. What are the most significant aspects of your role?
8. What do you find the most rewarding about being a middle level leader?
9. What do you find least rewarding about being a middle level leader?

The second group of questions is about whole school matters.

Group 2 questions: the interviewee's understanding of whole school matters pertaining to the role

1. What do you think are the expectations that people hold of you in the role?

2. Does your school have a documented role description for a middle level leader? If so, to what extent does your role description match the lived reality of carrying out the role?
3. How do you think your principal sees the expectations of you in the role? What degree of alignment do you see between your understanding and expectations of the role and your principal's?

The third group of questions is about the future of the role.

Group 3 questions: the preparation of and the future of the role

1. How were you prepared for your role i.e., what training or preparation courses were you offered, if any?
2. What professional learning/development have you had to assist you in your role? How effective has this been?
3. How do you think your role has changed or evolved over time?
4. What would you like to spend more time doing in your role?
5. What is expected of you in terms of contribution to whole school decision making and strategic direction?
6. Do you have any role to play beyond the school in your role as middle level leader?
7. What would you like to see changed in your role?
8. What would you like the essence of your role to involve?

That concludes the formal questions today. Is there any further information you would like to add that I haven't asked you? Thank you for your valuable contribution today.

Locked Bag 1307 Launceston
Tasmania 7250 Australia
Phone (03) 6324 3265 Fax (03) 6324 3048
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Appendix H Interview Schedule and Questions for Principals

Understanding the role of the middle level leader in New South Wales Catholic secondary schools

Interview Schedule for principals
Researcher/interviewer: Craig Wattam
Interviewee: _____ Gender: ____ Participant No: ____
Date: _____
Interview starting time: _____
Interview finishing time: _____
Interview duration: _____
Venue: _____

Guiding Interview Questions for principals

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. As you realise from the information sheet you have received, I am conducting research into the role of middle level leaders in Catholic schools in NSW. I am particularly interested in understanding the lived experience of the role both from the point of view of those holding the role and also from the viewpoint of the principals of the schools where participating middle level leaders work. The interview today will last approximately 60 minutes. Is that ok with you?

I will be taking notes and making an audio recording of the interview. Do you agree with me doing this?

Introduction

As we discussed on the phone, during this interview I would like to ask you some questions relating to your experience and understanding of the role of middle level leaders in your school. I will be asking you to talk to me about your understanding of the role and the expectations that you see for the role of middle level leader in Catholic secondary schools.

There are a number of questions. Please feel free to provide as much detail as you wish in your answers. If you are unclear about the meaning of any question, please do not hesitate to ask for clarification.

I will be making notes as you speak and, occasionally I may ask that you pause whilst I jot down particular comments that you make. Are you happy for me to do this?

Once we have worked our way through the questions, there will be an opportunity for you to add any further information and insights that you may have about the middle level leadership role in schools.

Please be assured that you may withdraw form this interview at any time without giving any reason. In order to promote the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants, do you agree to keep the contents of our discussion today confidential?

Are you comfortable and ready for me to commence? There are three broad categories that I'd like to discuss today. The first group of questions is about your experience and understanding of the role of middle level leader.

Group 1 questions: the interviewee's experience in the role of principal and understanding of the role of middle level leader

1. How long have you been in the position principal?
2. How long have been at this school?
3. Could you please tell me which of the following age groups you fit into:

   ☐ 22-30 years ☐ 31-40 years ☐ 41-50 years

   ☐ 51-60 years ☐ 61+ years
4. How do you see the role of middle level leader in a Catholic secondary school?
5. What do you think they actually do in their role?
6. What are the most significant aspects of the role of middle level leader?
7. What do you think would be the most rewarding thing about being a middle level leader?
8. What do you think would be the least rewarding thing about being a middle level leader?

The second group of questions is about whole school matters.

Group 2 questions: the interviewee's understanding of whole school matters pertaining to the role

1. What do you think are the expectations that people hold of those in the role of middle level leader?
2. Does your school have a documented role description for a middle level leader? If so, to what extent does this role description match the lived reality of carrying out the role?
3. What do you expect of your middle level leaders in their role? What degree of alignment do you see between your understanding and expectations of the role and that of the middle level leaders who hold the role?

The third group of questions is about the future of the role.

Group 3 questions: the preparation of and the future of the role

1. How were your middle level leaders prepared for their role i.e., what training or preparation courses were they offered, if any?
2. What professional learning/development have your middle level leaders had to assist them in their role? How effective has this been?
3. How do you think your role has changed or evolved over time?
4. What would you like to them spend more time doing in their role?
5. What is expected of you in terms of contribution to whole school decision making and strategic direction?
6. Do your middle level leaders have any role to play beyond the school?
7. What would you like to see changed in their role?
8. What would you like the essence of the role to involve?

That concludes the formal questions today. Is there any further information you would like to add that I haven't asked you? Thank you for your valuable contribution today.

Appendix I Round 2 Participant Guidelines for Conversation

Round 2 Interviews with Middle Level Leaders
Our second interview will involve a conversation with the following themes as guidelines for discussion.

Contribution to the ethos of Catholic schooling

- Promotion of the ethos of Catholic schools
- Expectations of middle level leaders in this domain
- Catholic leadership – understandings of and impact on your role
- Role modelling for staff

Preparation for the role

- Induction into the role – people involved
- What training or development programs would you like to see introduced both for beginning middle level leaders as well as in an ongoing way?
- Mentoring

Expectations and key aspects of the middle level leader role

- Similarities and differences in middle level leader roles
- Clarity of expectations
- The traditional understanding of the role
- Leadership and management
- Administration/paperwork

Leading the learning and pedagogical practice of your faculty

- Role and influence on classroom practice (observation)
- How do you share your pedagogical knowledge and expertise with your staff? How important is this aspect of your role?

Autonomy and authority

- Professional trust
- Influence
- Preparation for and aspiration to more senior roles (principalship)

Other Issues

- Any other matters you would like to raise we have not discussed